

An Examination of Racial and Gender Differences in Styles of Bullying among Adjudicated Youth

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Abstract

This research examines the influence of race and gender on bullying styles among adjudicated youth. The literature suggests that delinquent or adjudicated youth tend toward behaviors that are more aggressive. Of particular note in this investigation is the difference in physical versus nonphysical bullying and the relative influence of the gender or race on these styles of aggression. Subjects (n = 435) self-reported their behavior over the previous seven day period. Race and gender were found to be related to bullying. While males were significantly more likely to bully regardless of style, black males were the most aggressive. Black females were more like white males while white females were significantly less likely to bully than the other three groups regardless of style.

Keywords: bullying, physical bullying, non-physical bullying, delinquent youth, and adjudicated youth.

1. Introduction:

Violence and aggression among youth and young adults is a global problem (Reza A. et al., 2001; Krug et al, 2002). Pellegrini (2002) points out that school based aggression are a problem within all industrialized countries. This research focuses a sub category of violence/aggression – bullying, which is also found universally (Krug et al., 2002). In an examination of 13 year old youth from 27 countries, Currie (1998) found that bullying in school occurred at least sometime in all the countries studied with a range of 64.2% in Austria to 11.9% in Sweden. However, some nations reported a particularly low level of bullying with youth in England (85.2%) and Sweden (86.8%) reporting never having bullied another child.

An examination of those who bully frequently (weekly) indicated bullying of others was highest in Latvia (9.7%) and Greenland (9.6%) with the lowest rates reported in England (1.2%) and Sweden (1.2%). Youth from the United States of America reported 34.9 % bullying sometimes, 7.6% bullying weekly and 57.5% never bullying. This form of aggression among youth in the school context is an issue of much concern because it not only has negative implications for the victim (Boulton and Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1978; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Slee, 1995; Slee and Rigby, 1993a; Kaltiala-Heino et al, 1999; Austin and Joseph, 1996; Bijttebier and Vertommen, 1998; Forero et.al., 1999; Byrne, 1994; Kumpulainen et al., 1998; Rigby, 1999; Slee and Rigby, 1993b; Salivalli et al., 1998; Salmon et al., 1998; Williams et al., 1996) who might be traumatized but also can create an atmosphere of apprehension among other students and undermines the order necessary for the education process to take place and goals to be realized (NCES, 2003).

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2. Literature Review

Bullying as a form of aggression has a particular set of parameters about which there is substantial agreement in the academic/educational community. Nansel et al. (2001) state the defining criteria as: a) a specific type of aggressive behavior; b) initiated with intent to harm or disturb; c) repeated over time; and d) perpetrated by more physically or verbally powerful individuals or groups on those with less power. It can include either singly or in combination - verbal (name calling or threats), physical (striking), or psychological (rumors, shunning or exclusion) actions and, like other aggressive patterns, it might be either overt or covert.

A particularly important component of bullying is the politics of interaction which is related to differences in social psychological power between bullies and their victims. However, this dynamic must be understood within a broader context of attitudes and behaviors about aggression which are related to developmental and socio cultural factors. When examining developmental factors, it is acknowledged that gender differences exist with regard to aggression or violence with males becoming aggressive earlier than females (Macoby and Jacklin, 1980), males being more prone to overt physical aggression/violence than females (Block, 1983; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Eagly and Steffen, 1986; Hilton, Grant, and Rice, 2000; Lagerspetz, Bjoerkqvist, and Peltonen, 1988; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Morash, 1986; Owens and MacMullin, 1995; Owens, Shute, and Slee, 2000; Peters, 2001; Simons et al., 2001), and aggression/violence increasing with age across the life course (Hoving, Wallace, and LaForme, 1979; Enron et al., 1986; Simons et al., 2001). For bullying there is some variance in this age based linear pattern of aggression in general with some evidence that bullying increases during the middle school years and then diminishes as youth continue through their secondary schooling (Olweus, 1993a, NCES, 1995, Pellegrini and Bartini, 2000). Thus, it becomes particularly problematic in middle school setting.

Gender issues become another socio/contextual dimension for understanding bullying behavior. Bullying, like the more general pattern of aggression, tends to characterize the actions of boys rather than girls with both perpetrator and victim being male (Bosworth, Espelage, and Simon, 1999; Boulton and Smith, 1990; Olweus, 1993b; Smith and Sharp, 1994). It is less frequent the case of boys bullying girls; however, when sexual harassment takes a form of bullying, girls can become increasingly the victims of boys bullying (Pellegrini et al, 1999; Pellegrini, 2002). In addition, bully behavior for girls tends to be more patterned similar to general aggression with girls using more covert such as relational or social strategies whereas boys might use either but more likely overt physical strategies (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick et al., 2001).

The social context or prevailing social culture might offer an additional layer for prediction of interpersonal aggression. Particularly, we are interested in the contextual or cultural issue of race. Lindesmith et al. (2001) point out that our cinematic society creates images of violence grounded in the context of non white neighborhoods with such movies as "Boyz in the Hood". However, arguments about the "hood" might be more a consequence of a culture of underclass rather than race as singular factor. In fact, other evidence indicates that the boundaries of race do not protect youth from violence in school or neighborhood. Some have suggested that the last decade of the 20th century was found to have a significant increase in the overall level and rate of aggression among adolescents (e.g., Simmons et al., 2001). Further, questions about the influence of race are indicated by the fact that much of the school based media images are of white middle class youth in middle class schools and/or neighborhoods.

Our research examines bullying among youth within what is considered a violence prone social context. Specifically, we examine bullying among youth who have been adjudicated by the state and placed in state custody. Delinquent behavior is associated with increased levels of aggression (Vazsonyi et al., 1999) and is often examined in conjunction with aggression (Deijen et al., 2002, Huesmann and Guerra, 1997; Morash, 1986). It is particularly noteworthy that delinquent youth share an acceptance for aggression which is positively related to their aggressive and delinquent behavior (Huesmann and Guerra, 1997; McConville and Cornell, 2003). Such a shared normative system is a central feature in the culture of delinquent youth and the use of aggression to establish or maintain status. However, the literature does not indicate a prediction of bullying as more likely among delinquent compared to non-delinquent youth or those who have been adjudicated by the juvenile justice system.

This work focuses on bullying as a particular form of aggression and poses the following research questions: Is gender a predictor of differences in bullying? Are there gender differences in styles of bullying? Is race a predictor of differences in bullying?

Are there race differences in styles of bullying? Are there interaction effects between gender and race on differences in bullying? Are there interaction effects between gender and race on styles of bullying?

3. Methods

3.1 Sample

The sample is composed of 435 middle school youth who incarcerated in the Alabama Department of Youth Services facilities. Students completed a self-administered questionnaire taking 20–25 minutes in the classroom situation under teacher supervision. Students were a part of the Alabama Youth Survey, sponsored by the Center for Law and Civic Education, Cumberland School of Law, Samford University. The sample ranges in age from 12 -15 ($M = 13.45$; $SD = .61$).

3.2 Measurement

A Bully Index consisted of the summed self-report frequency of aggression against other students over a period of a week previous to the survey completion. Bully items were (a) I called other students bad names, (b) I pushed or shoved other students, (c) I said things about other kids to make other students laugh, and (d) I encouraged other students to fight. Respondents circled the number of times in the last seven days these behaviors had been done from 0–6. The Bully Index had a range of 0-24 ($M = 4.59$; $SD = 5.57$) and was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .80. This index was divided into a physical aggression subcomponent and a non-physical aggression subcomponent to test for differences in styles of bullying across race and gender. The Physical Aggression Index included behaviors of pushing/shoving other students and encouraging other students to fight. This index had a range of 0-12 ($M = 1.52$; $SD = 2.72$) and was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .73. The Non Physical Aggression Index had a range of 0-12 ($M = 3.07$; $SD = 3.49$) and was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .74.

Gender was a nominal variable with 0 (*male*) to 1 (*female*). Approximately 52% of the sample was male. Race/ethnicity was a nominal variable with 0 (*white*) to 1 (*Nonwhite*). About 64% of the respondents were white.

3.3 Analysis

Difference in means testing was used to determine if bully outcomes differ across socio-demographic characteristics of race and gender. The first part of the mean comparison involved one-way ANOVA. Once significant differences among race*gender group means were found, post hoc testing (Tukey's HSD) was done to determine which means differed in multiple comparisons.

4. Results

One-Way ANOVA and Post Hoc Testing

Differences in means across the different levels for socio-demographic characteristics (Black Female, Black Male, White Female, and White Male) were determined with one-way ANOVA and Tukey's HSD. The results in Table 1 show that males reported higher mean values than females on the Bully Index, with Black Males reporting the highest value and White females the lowest. There were significant mean differences between Black Females and Black Males ($p < .05$). Also, the mean for Black Males was significantly greater than both White Females and White Males ($p < .05$). Finally, White Males had significantly greater mean frequency of bullying than White Females ($p < .05$).

Table 1: One-way Analysis of Variance for Bully Index by Race and Gender (N = 435)

Variable	n	Bully Index	
		M	SD
Race/Gender			
(a) Black Female	82	a,b 4.29*	5.42
(b) Black Male	67	b,c b,d 7.84*	6.43
(c) White Female	136	c,d 2.46*	3.91
(d) White Male	150	5.24	5.72

* $p < .05$

Note. The following indicates significant differences between groups:

- a,b - Black Female vs. Black Male.
- b,c - Black Male vs. White Female.
- b,d - Black Male vs. White Male.
- c,d - White Female vs. White Male.

Table 2 shows that there were significant mean differences across groups for both Covert and Overt Indices. For the Covert Aggression Index, Black Females and Black Males ($p < .01$), Black Males and White Females ($p < .01$), Black Males and White males ($p < .05$), and White Females and White males ($p < .01$) differed statistically, with males reporting higher mean values than females across race and black males reporting higher values than white males. For the Overt Aggression Index, significant mean differences were the same in terms of groups and level of significance. For this index, Black Females and White Females were significantly different ($p < .05$), with black females reporting more overt aggressive behaviors.

Table 2: One-way Analysis of Variance for Covert and Overt Indices by Race and Gender (N = 435)

Variable	n	M	Covert		Overt	
			SD	n	MSD	MSD
Race/Gender						
(a) Black Female	82	2.81**	a,b 3.37	82	1.48**	2.92
(b) Black Male	67	4.90**	b,c b,c 4.06	67	2.94**	3.48
(c) White Female	136	1.93**	c,d 2.75	136	.52*	1.53
(d) White Male	150	3.38*	b,d 3.49	149	1.87*	2.85

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note. The following indicates significant differences between groups:

- a,b - Black Female vs. Black Male.
- a,c – Black Female vs. White Female.
- b,c - Black Male vs. White Female.
- b,d - Black Male vs. White Male.
- c,d – White Female vs. White Male.

Across all indices, Black Males had higher mean scores followed by White Males, Black Females, and White Females. The results in Table 1 show that the ratio of the mean values for bully index indicate that black males resort to bully behavior three times more than white females. At the same time, white males are twice as likely to report bullying than white females.

5. Conclusions

These findings support the argument that males are more likely than females to bully others. But, the gender prediction for differences in covert versus overt patterns is not supported. Males simply are the bullies among these adjudicated youth regardless of the form of bullying. Since there are virtually no other options for these males to demonstrate status, they rely on interpersonal politics not athletics or other institutionalized means. If they had other means before retention in the state facilities, they are not available in their current place.

It may be that the cinematic society for race and aggressive behavior in the “hood” (Lindesmith, 1999) is reflected in black males actions in their current situation. Their relative difference in reported frequency of bullying is not only statistically significant but multifold in number of reported acts. However, the black male youth in this study are not considered to necessarily represent black male youth in general within are black community. In fact, their personal attitudes toward aggression and their aggressive actions may be a salient factor in their entering the adjudication process. In addition, black females are more comparable to white males than to their female counterparts. It is the white females who are distinctly different than any of the other three groups. Our data do not reveal the answer but future research would be informed by our findings to examine if the patterns of bullying are horizontal (within gender race groups – interpersonal status differences) as some existing evidence indicates or vertical (between gender race groups – social structural status differences). Because bullying is political, with the powerful bullying the less powerful one, might expect the white females to be victims more than the others. However, the power hypothesis is not born out in the case of black females who report bullying frequency similar to white males.

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