



Power Imbalance: Internalizing Problems in Youth Involved in Bullying

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Introduction

- Bullying is a prevalent, serious, and pervasive problem that impacts children and youth both in and out of school (Hymel & Swearer, 2015), with 20% of students ages 12-18 reported being bullied at school during the school year (Musu et al., 2019).
- Most definitions of bullying are generally based on three criteria: intent to harm, repetition, and a power imbalance (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Olweus, 1993; Volk et al., 2017).
- According to Olweus (1993), the asymmetric power relationship between students involved in bullying is essential to classify aggressive acts as bullying; however, there has been little research on how bullying relates to power (Vaillancourt et al., 2003).
- There has been a lack of research on power imbalance and psychological outcomes (e.g. anxiety, depression) for both the targets and perpetrators of bullying.
- The current study presents results from an individualized, cognitive-behavioral intervention for students ages 7-18 who are referred for bullying behaviors.

Methods

Procedures

- The current study examined the endorsement of a perceived power imbalance and association with reported internalizing problems (i.e. anxiety and depression) in targets and perpetrators of bullying.

Participants

- For this study, targets ($n = 131$) and perpetrators ($n = 162$) were included. Participants were asked to select characteristics of who bullied them or whom they bullied. Power imbalance was assessed based on the endorsement of the item "Someone with power," for targets, and "Someone with no power," for perpetrators.
- Participants had a mean age of 11.45 years ($SD = 1.75$), with 52.7% identifying as White.

Measures

Swearer Bully Survey – Student Version (BYS-S, 2016)

- The Bully Survey Student Version (BYS-S) is a four part, 46-question survey that queries students regarding their experiences with bullying, perceptions of bullying, and attitudes toward bullying during the past school year.

The Children's Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1992)

- The 27-item self-rating scale was used to assess depressive symptoms. Participants endorse statements that best describe themselves in the past two weeks, with items ranging between 0 to 2. Higher CDI scores indicate more severe self-reported symptoms of depression.

The Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (MASC; March, 1997)

- The 39-item scale was used to assess symptoms of anxiety and covers four subscales. Participants rate the severity of each statement using a 4-point Likert scale. Higher MASC scores indicate more severe self-reported symptoms of anxiety.

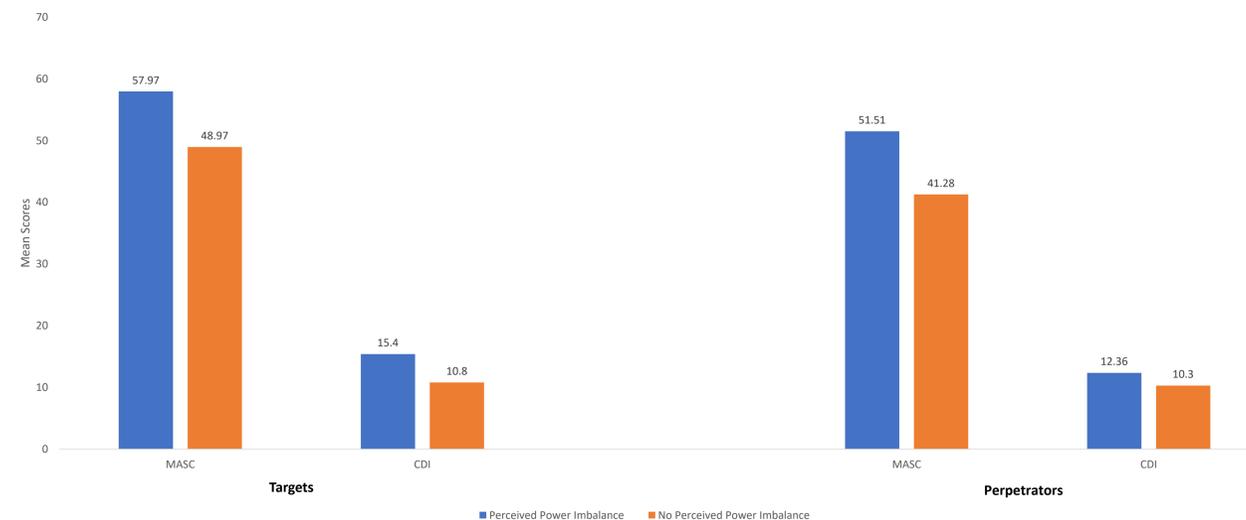
Results

Targets of Bullying

- Youth who identified as targets who perceived a power imbalance had significantly higher mean ratings of reported anxiety symptoms ($F(1,125) = 5.315, p = .023, Mse = 394.799$) than those who were bullied but did not perceive a power imbalance.
- Targets who perceived a power imbalance had significantly higher mean ratings of reported depressive symptoms ($F(1,122) = 7.709, p = .006, Mse = 62.478$) than those who were bullied but did not perceive a power imbalance.

Perpetrators of Bullying

- Perpetrators who perceived a power imbalance had significantly higher mean ratings of anxious symptoms than those with no perceived power imbalance ($F(1,152) = 7.866, p = .006, Mse = 345.228$), but there were no significant differences between reported depressive symptoms of bullying perpetrators.



Discussion

- We found that targets with a perceived power imbalance, assessed via the endorsement of being bullied by someone with power, reported more internalizing problems (i.e. higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms) than youth who were bullied who did not perceive a power imbalance.
- Interestingly, our results also showed that bully perpetrators who endorsed bullying someone with no power experienced higher levels of anxious symptoms than bully perpetrators who did not perceive a power imbalance.
- These findings demonstrate that, despite the lack of focus in research, perceived power imbalance is a critical feature of bullying.
- These results demonstrate that perceived power imbalance can play a role in internalizing psychological outcomes for both targets and perpetrators.
- Due to the nature of this current study, the causality of the relationship between bullying involvement and endorsement of internalizing symptoms could not be determined. Future studies should explore this relationship longitudinally.

Implications

- Individualized assessment and intervention, for all roles in bullying involvement, should include evaluation of internalizing psychological outcomes (i.e. symptoms of anxiety and depression).
- Psychologists and school professionals should be aware of internalizing symptoms for youth who are involved in bullying, including both targets and perpetrators.
- Youth's perception of power imbalance should be assessed and taken into consideration when evaluating bullying involvement among youth.
- Anxiety-related assessment and treatment should be considered for not only targets, but for perpetrators of bullying behaviors as well.