



# Perceptions of Power Imbalance Across Roles in the Bullying Dynamic

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## Introduction

- Power imbalance between individuals is a defining feature of bullying and is utilized to inflict harm or control another's behavior (Olweus, 1997).
- Individuals experiencing victimization endorsed physical strength and popularity most often as power differentials (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002; Oblath et al., 2019).
- It is less understood how these perceptions may vary for bully perpetrators and bystanders involved in the bullying dynamic. Moreover, it is unknown how these power imbalances may differ (or not) at various developmental stages.
- **Research Questions:** What are the most common power imbalance factors reported (1) by victims, bully perpetrators, and bystanders, and (2) at different developmental timepoints (e.g. for elementary, middle and high school students)?

## Method

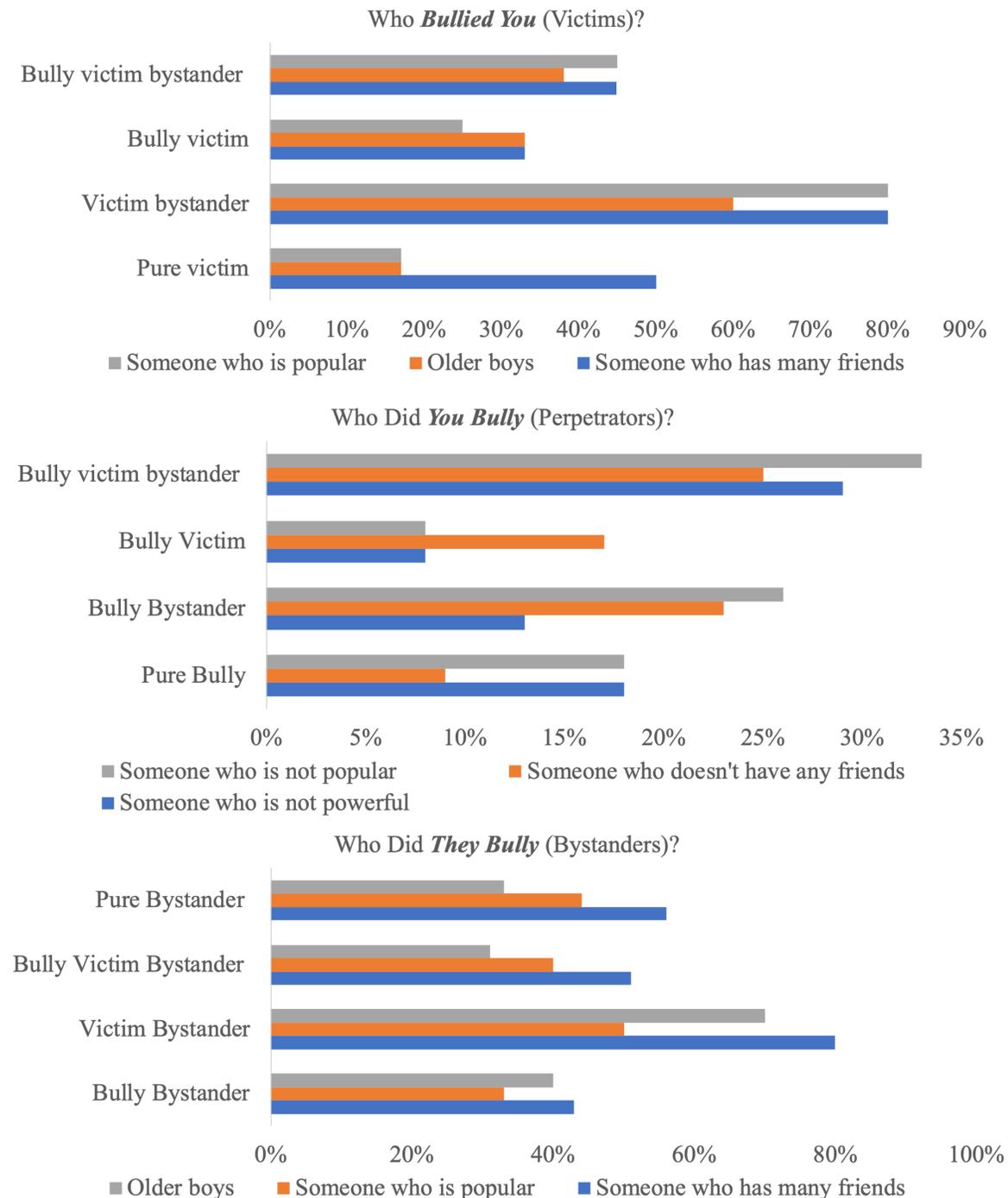
**Procedures & Participants.** Data were collected from a larger study with youth involved in bullying. Data collection took place from 2011 to 2019 via a Tier-III cognitive-behavioral intervention for bullying involvement. Participants were referred to the intervention due to involvement in the bullying dynamic. Responses were collected from 195 participants (male = 98, female = 67) in grades one through 11.

### Measures.

**Bully Survey – Student Version** (Swearer, 2001): Participants were asked to select characteristics of individuals who bullied them, bullied others, or whom they bullied. Individuals were categorized based on their endorsed involvement in bullying, victimization, and/or bystander behaviors during the past school year.

**Data analysis.** Frequency analyses were used to calculate the percentage of participants who endorsed power imbalance features.

## Results



- **Reasons for Victimization-** “Someone who has many friends.” was the most common power imbalance feature reported by pure-victims (50%), victim-bystanders (80%), bully-victims (33%), and bully-victim-bystanders (45%).
- **Reasons for Perpetration-** “Someone who is not popular,” and “Someone who is not powerful”, were common power imbalance features reported by pure-bullies (18%); “someone who is not popular” by bully-bystanders (26%) and bully victim bystanders (33%) and “someone who doesn't have any friends” was commonly reported by bully-victims (17%)
- **Endorsements of Power Imbalance Across Developmental Periods**
- “Someone who has many friends,” was the most commonly endorsed power imbalance feature for elementary (60%), middle (39%), and high school victims (63%), and for elementary (59%) and middle (49%) school bystanders.
- “Older boys” was most frequently endorsed for high school bystanders (67%). “Someone who is not popular” was most commonly endorsed for elementary (36%) and middle school perpetrators (23%), while “someone who is not powerful,” was most common for high school perpetrators (57%).

## Discussion

- “Someone who has many friends” was the most endorsed item for individuals who bullied others. These results are consistent with findings from Oblath et al. (2019) and Dijkstra et al. (2008), that popularity is a commonly endorsed power imbalance feature in the bullying dynamic. It is hypothesized that popularity is salient because it is an external factor that can be easily targeted by the peer group (Chaux & Castellanos, 2015).
- The endorsement of power imbalances differed by role and developmental stages. Notably, bystanders were more likely to perceive victims as having traits typically associated with socially competent individuals (i.e. someone who has many friends). This indicates that individualized interventions will likely be more successful at targeting sources of bullying issues.
- Future research should focus on factors that increase the risk of being involved in the bullying dynamic and effective interventions that can mitigate these risks.
- Increasing awareness of the power imbalances involved in the bullying dynamic could help school personnel recognize marginalized students and identify ways to promote inclusion and acceptance in school communities.