2018

ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF BEHAVIORAL FUNCTIONING: MEASURING PERCEPTIONS OF ONE'S OWN BEHAVIOR

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ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF BEHAVIORAL FUNCTIONING: MEASURING PERCEPTIONS OF ONE'S OWN BEHAVIOR

A Specialty Study

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Studies, Leadership, and Counseling

Murray State University

Murray, KY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Specialist in Education

by

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December 2018

ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF BEHAVIORAL FUNCTIONING: MEASURING PERCEPTIONS OF ONE'S OWN BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

As bullying type behaviors have increased in recent years, many school districts have responded by implementing rigid zero-tolerance policies that punish students with no regard toward situational or social contexts. These policies have been shown to have many negative social, psychological, and academic consequences. Numerous social and developmental factors involved in bullying-type situations make it necessary to gather information on both the frequency and the social contexts in which they occur: exhibiting these behaviors toward close friends versus exhibiting these behaviors toward individuals who are not close friends. Of particular interest is if students exhibit bullying-type behaviors more often in the presence of friends, which could indicate that these behaviors are not being exhibited with malicious intent, but instead of part of normal adolescent culture within groups.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In recent years, bullying has become an issue in schools which has caused growing concerns for school safety. Following a survey of the 2012-2013 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) created a report in which 21.5% of students' ages twelve through eighteen reported that they had been bullied. Definitions for bullying are numerous and the forms of these behaviors vary. One definition states that bullying is the use of aggression from a position of power, often used to establish dominance and status within a peer group (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008). Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) categorized reported bullying-type behaviors into seven different types of occurrences:

- Making fun of or insulting the victim;
- Creating and/or spreading rumors about the victim;
- Threatening to harm the victim;
- Pushing, shoving, tripping, or spitting on the victim;
- Forcing the victim to do things against their will;
- Purposely excluding the victim from activities; and
- Willfully damaging or destroying the victim's property

Existing research has shown that bullying may be physical (hitting, pushing, kicking) or verbal (name-calling), and will almost always involve multiple peers (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Additionally, these behaviors can also be direct (face to face confrontation) or indirect (spreading rumors). It is important to consider social and situational context when examining

bullying behaviors because students are affected by the presence of their peers (friends vs not friends), their physical environment (playground vs classroom), as well as developmental factors (Hale & King, 2014).

In 2012, researchers conducted a survey of students in grades 6-10 and recorded the frequency of physical, verbal, social exclusion, rumor spreading, and cyber-bullying occurrences (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Of these five forms of bullying, verbal (37.8%) and social exclusion (24.4%) were the most prevalent. All five forms of bullying were also reported higher in frequency for grades seven and eight than for grades nine and ten, indicating that these behaviors occur more frequently with middle school students than with high school students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to validate a survey instrument in order to utilize it in larger settings to investigate adolescent students' perceptions of their own behaviors. Data from surveys completed by students were used to assess differences between self-reported behaviors when students are with close friends versus when they are with those who are not their close friends.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because as bullying trends increase and schools continue to struggle to adapt appropriate disciplinary measures, it is necessary to obtain an understanding of students' perspectives and the contexts in which these behaviors occur. Once validated, the instrumentation in this study can be utilized by school administrators as a means of gathering data to be used in planning, implementing, and improving school-wide behavior interventions and discipline policies.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Increasing trends in bullying behaviors have led school administrators to adopt harsh zero-tolerance policies to punish students caught exhibiting these behaviors (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012). Understanding students' perceptions of these behaviors can enable school districts and other agencies to determine if these behaviors in school are exhibited as acts of aggression or if they are a part of adolescent socialization.

Zero Tolerance

The original intent of zero tolerance policies was to discourage and criminalize the possession and usage of illegal drugs and substances in schools in the 1980s. These policies were later updated in the 1990s to include possession of potentially dangerous weapons. In recent years, these policies have been adopted in districts to battle against bullying and other aggressive behaviors. These predetermined and non-negotiable punishments, which generally consist of suspension or expulsion, were intended to punish specific acts of misbehavior that were deemed as serious threats to school safety. However, schools now use these policies to punish students for a wide range of offenses, including trivial offenses that pose no threat to school safety (Browne-Dianis, 2011).

Although zero tolerance policies have been around since the 1980s and have been utilized by school districts, there is no evidence of their effectiveness. In fact, evidence has been shown that zero-tolerance policies have two major drawbacks. The first drawback is that school administrators tend to abuse and misuse these policies. Instead of using these policies to remove

students who are a threat to school safety, administrators have used them to punish typically well-behaved students (first time offenders) who are generally considered to be good kids and who have no prior behavioral issues (Martinez, 2009). The second drawback is that administrators are overusing suspension as a punishment (Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006). Research has also shown that suspension does not benefit the students or the schools and that suspension is not an effective means of correcting behavior. After being suspended, students often return to school with the same or worse behavioral issues, and they fall behind their peers academically as a result of not being in class (Martinez, 2009).

In response to growing concerns about zero-tolerance policies, the American Psychological Association (APA) created the Zero Tolerance Task Force to perform an evidentiary review of zero tolerance practices (Skiba, et al., 2006). Following their review, the task force's report stated that school violence has not shown any significant decrease from the frequent use of suspension and expulsion as punishments and that the overall learning climate is less satisfactory in schools that employ the consistent use of zero tolerance policies. The Task Force concluded their report by making several recommendations for improving and reforming zero tolerance policies:

- Applying these policies with greater flexibility;
- Taking social and situational context and the expertise of teachers and administrators into account;
- Performing routine evaluations on school disciplinary codes to make sure that all disciplinary procedures are having a positive impact on student behavior and school safety; and

- Reserving zero-tolerance policies for only the most severe and serious disruptive behaviors.

These recommendations are particularly important when considering the social and psychological development of adolescents, as these policies may cause significant adverse effects.

Adolescent Development

The development of morality plays a crucial role in explaining how children and adolescents can act so viciously toward their peers. Multiple studies have been conducted that showed that students who reported that they had engaged in bullying-type behaviors toward their peers expected positive outcomes from those behaviors and they perceived that aggressive behaviors were appropriate responses in social interactions with peers (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005). The results of one study revealed that students used all of the methods of moral disengagement to justify aggressive behaviors: cognitive restructuring—reframing the behavior as justifiable, often by comparing it to worse acts and diminishing the severity of the behavior; minimizing one's agentive role—diffusion of responsibility; disregarding or distorting negative consequences—distancing oneself from the negative consequences and focusing on positive outcomes; and dehumanization and attribution of blame— the victim deserved to be bullied or should have been able to prevent it (Gini, Pozzoli, Hymel, 2014). These four methods of moral engagement or reasoning explain the process by which even good students can justify their involvement in bullying behaviors.

Other characteristics of adolescent development include irrational thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. In 1998, a study was conducted in which adolescents and adults were shown various emotions depicted in pictures. The adolescents who participated in the study often incorrectly

identified the emotions that were accurately identified by adults (Dacey, Travers, & Fiore, 2009). These results were best explained by the underdeveloped amygdala and prefrontal cortex lobes in the brains of the adolescents, which hinders their reasoning and decision-making abilities, as well as their emotional responsiveness.

Another major component of adolescent development is identity formation—the time in which adolescents are struggling to discover who they are as individuals and where and how they fit into society. The identity formation process consists of four stages—confusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement—and a majority of adolescents have been seen to shift back and forth among all four of these stages (Dacey, Travers, & Fiore. 2009). During the stages of confusion and moratorium, adolescents often experience turbulent, unpredictable, and distressing thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. While considered typical for adolescents, Dacey, Travers, & Fiore (2009) have suggested that these same thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors would be considered pathological in adults. For this reason, it is important for adults to analyze these situations within the context of adolescence.

Long-Term Consequences

Bullying can have long-term consequences for both the victims and the bullies. Adolescent bullies have an increased risk for issues such as delinquency, dropping out of school, and substance abuse (Milsom & Gallo, 2006). Victims and bullies alike tend to be at a higher risk for psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and poor psychosocial adjustment. Both bullies and victims may likewise suffer from physical symptoms such as backaches, stomachaches, and sleeplessness. Many victims are also at higher risk for anti-social behaviors, poor academic performance, and greater absenteeism (Kupferman-Meik, Burris-Marmoth, Rapaport, Roychoudhury, 2013).

Growing concerns about bullying in recent years have caused bullying to become well established as a deviant behavior. The Society for Adolescent Medicine (SAM) supports the following position, stating "Bullying among peers, although common, is not acceptable social behavior among youth. Adults and adolescents are encouraged to prevent bullying behavior and to change the perception that such behavior is normative" (Eisenberg & Aalsma, 2005).

Unfortunately, as a result of zero-tolerance policies, labeling often occurs when schools attempt to punish these behaviors. Rather than reduce delinquency in these students, labeling hinders the students' future educational and employment opportunities and makes them more likely to engage in deviant activities in the future (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003). The result of this kind of deviant labeling is that once a child is labeled as a bully, he or she will retain that label; it will become part of his/her identity and the negative connotations associated with it. Rather than correcting the problem behavior, educators will be solidifying it. In order to prevent these negative long-term consequences, it is necessary to study bullying-type behaviors while considering developmental factors, social and situational contexts, and students' perspectives.

Bullying

In 2008, Pepler, Jiang, Craig, and Connolly published the results of a longitudinal study in which they examined the trajectories of bullying behaviors with students whose ages ranged 10-14 over the course of seven years. The instrumentation used by this study measured the frequency and severity of behaviors by asking students to use a five-point scale to report on their behaviors that they exhibited within the last five days and within the last two months. A child domain was also included, which was comprised of three constructs: moral disengagement, physical aggression, and relational aggression. The results of the study revealed four trajectories in which 9.9% of students reported high levels of bullying, 13.4% reported early moderate to

almost no levels of bullying at the end of high school, and 35.1% reported consistently moderate levels. Elevated risks in individual, parent, and peer relationship domains were found for students who reported exhibiting bullying behaviors.

A study conducted by Wang, Iannotti, & Luk in 2012 examined patterns of engagement in adolescent bullying behaviors with students in grades 6 through 10. Measures of frequency for bullying behaviors were included for physical bullying, verbal bullying, social exclusion, spreading rumors, and cyber bullying. Students were asked to choose from the following responses for how often they engaged in bullying behaviors within a two-month period: never, once or twice, two or three times a month, about once a week, or several times a week. Additional items were administered to provide measures for frequencies of substance use and carrying a weapon. A latent class analysis model was utilized and three classes were identified for each gender: All-Types Bullies—students with higher probabilities of exhibiting all five forms of bullying behaviors; Verbal/Social Bullies—students with higher probabilities of verbal bullying, moderate probabilities of social exclusion, and low to moderate probabilities of other forms of bullying; Non-Involved—students with much lower probabilities of exhibiting any of the five forms of bullying behavior. The results of this study suggest that boys were more likely than girls to be All-Types Bullies. All-Types Bullies were found to be most prevalent in grades six to eight, and Verbal/Social Bullies were found to be most prevalent in grades seven to eight. Furthermore, All-Types Bullies were identified as being at the highest risk of substance use and carrying weapons, and most cyber bullies were identified as belonging to a group of highly aggressive adolescents who exhibit all forms of bullying behaviors.

One research study examined teachers' understanding of bullying of children in their classrooms. A questionnaire instrument was administered to students in grades four and five to

identify students who self-reported being victims of bullying. Individual interviews were conducted with teachers regarding their understanding of bullying and their responses were considered in light of their students' identification as victims. Interviews were conducted with 13 teachers in regard to 17 students who self-identified as bullying victims (10 teachers had one student, two teachers had two students each, and one teacher had one student). Additionally, the teacher interviews also gathered information regarding teachers' perceptions of definitions of bullying and the severity of different forms of bullying behavior. The results of this study found that teachers were unaware that 10 of 17 children were victims of bullying. All of the teachers defined bullying similarly, highlighting the imbalance of power and intentional nature of bullying behaviors. They did, however, differ in their perceptions of the severity of different forms of bullying behaviors; for example, one teacher identified non-physical behaviors as less serious than physical behaviors, whereas other teachers identified both physical and non-physical behaviors as serious (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005).

A study conducted by Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, and Bradshaw in 2011, used data from 11,764 students, 960 parents, and 1,027 staff, in 30 elementary, 9 middle, and 5 high schools in a Maryland public school district to examine perceptual differences regarding peer victimization and the broader bullying climate among students, staff, and parents. The instrumentation used in their study provided measures for outcomes variables—safety and belongingness were assessed by having students and staff respond to 2 items using a 4-point scale, as well as a yes or no response item assessing if bullying had been witnessed in the past month; individual-level predictor variables—attitudes toward retaliation and victimization were also assessed using the same measurements as the outcomes variables; and school-level contextual variables—prevalence of indirect victimization and student and teacher perceptions of bullies were assessed

via a series of yes or no responses. The results of the study had several significant findings, including that both students and staff who had been victims of bullying were less likely to report feelings of safety and belongingness, and were also more likely to be witnesses to bullying. Attitudes supporting aggressive retaliation were inversely associated with safety and belongingness, and also associated with greater risks for witnessing bullying for both staff and students. Multiple discrepancies among staff, students, and parents were also found. For instance, staff were reported more likely than students to feel a sense of belonging and safety but were also much more likely to witness bullying than students. Furthermore, parents' perceptions of safety and belongingness were not significantly related to staff and students reported outcomes, although a high correlation was found between parents' perceptions of safety and belongingness, suggesting that the parents may not have discriminated between these two areas the way that students and staff did.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to continue to validate the survey instrument previously published by this author and to extend the research with this instrument. Data collected from the surveys were used to assess differences between self-reported bullying behaviors when students are with peers they consider to be close friends versus when they are with peers who are not close friends. The behaviors being rated were categorized as physical or verbal, and direct or indirect; however, this study also measured the frequency—how many times the behaviors were exhibited in a week—and the intent of the behaviors—intentionally being rude, attempting to annoy, attempting to embarrass, aggressively attempting to show power over someone, and attempting to degrade someone's value.

In a published study in 2014, a previous version of the instrumentation utilized in this study was used to gather data on middle school students' perceptions of their own behaviors. The survey instrument contained 30 items and was administered to students in grades six through eight at two middle schools in western Kentucky. Both schools were identified as having relatively high levels of ethnic and economic diversity. The initial validation was successful after excluding one item due to poor factorization (Hale & King, 2014). For the present study, a survey was created using 29 items from the previous instrumentation, and in contrast to the previous instrument, was this time administered to both middle school and high school students in grades 6 through 12.

Research Design

Based on the previous instrumentation, five different categories of bullying behavior were utilized in the creation of the surveys: direct physical, indirect physical, direct verbal, indirect verbal, and nonverbal nonphysical. A scaled response survey instrument was selected for this study. These five categories were discovered by the author using exploratory factor analysis.

Participants

Data were gathered from three school districts with students in grades 6 through 12. Participants in the study ranged in ages from 10 to 18 (M = 13.3). The schools that were selected included one district in western Kentucky (n=18) and two districts in southern Illinois (n=52; n=40). All three districts were located in rural communities. The distribution of genders among total participants was 74 (68.1%) females and 35 (31.9%) males, and the distribution of participants by race was 96 (86.5%) white, 5 (4.5%) African-American, and 9 (8.1%) biracial. Participants included 18 (16.2%) students in grade six, 32 (28.8%) in grade seven, 24 (21.6%) in grade eight, 13 (11.7%) in grade nine, 9 (8.1%) in grade ten, 10 (9%) in grade eleven, and 4 (3.6%) in grade twelve.

Hypotheses

Based on the existing research on bullying and adolescent development, no significant difference in the frequency of bullying-type behaviors exhibited between peers who are close friends and peers who are not close friends was anticipated. Specifically, it was hypothesized that these behaviors would be exhibited equally or more frequently with peers who are close friends than peers who are not close friends. Furthermore, it was expected that there would be no significant difference between the forms and frequency of behaviors exhibited by middle school students and high school students.

Instrumentation

The survey contained 29 items comprised of six behaviors (i.e., items) from each of five categories— direct physical, indirect physical, direct verbal, indirect verbal, and nonverbal nonphysical—except for direct physical, which only attributed five behaviors. A demographics section was included at the top of each survey, prompting students to provide their grade, age, gender, race, and the name of their school. Word choice was carefully considered in the creation of the instrument. The word "bullying" was never used, and the behaviors on each survey were described objectively so that students were not answering based on their perceptions of the behaviors as being either good or bad.

Two sets of the survey were created, both containing identical questions and format; however, the instructions at the top of the page prompted students to consider different social contexts for the described behaviors. The directions in Set One asked how often students exhibited the described behaviors among peers in their group of close friends. The directions in Set Two asked how often students exhibited behaviors when among peers NOT in their group of close friends. The researcher read the directions to students before they completed the survey in order to provide clarification on the instructions for each set of the survey.

Variables

Two different surveys were created, each measuring five constructs. This resulted in ten variables being measured by scaled responses (Likert-type scale) in terms of physical vs verbal behaviors, direct vs indirect behaviors, and the social context in which those behaviors occur. Independent variables included age, grade, school, gender, and race, which were assigned numerical values when being loaded into SPSS. Additionally, given the high consistency of the previous instrument's validation, an exploratory factor analysis was determined to not be

necessary. Cronbach's alpha was .923 with 29 items and 110 participants. The five factors from the previous instrumentation were used which consisted of the following:

- Factor One - students are intentionally being rude to someone
- Factor Two - students are attempting to annoy someone
- Factor Three - students are attempting to embarrass someone
- Factor Four - students are aggressively attempting to show power over someone
- Factor Five - students are attempting to degrade someone's value (Hale & King, 2014)

Procedures

School administrators were contacted by phone or email to solicit their interest and were provided with a copy of the instrumentation. After administrators agreed to participate, parent permission forms were sent home with students in the schools one to two weeks prior to administration of the survey. Permission forms were returned to classroom teachers and then given to the principal or other administrator. The forms were collected by the primary investigator upon arriving at the schools. All of the data collection procedures were conducted according to the approved IRB protocol.

The survey was administered to groups of students and typically required ten minutes to complete. All students in each classroom were administered the survey in order to prevent isolation of students who were not participating. Students were read a detailed statement that let them know that although everyone was taking the survey, only those who had signed parental permission forms would be asked to sign the assent form.

Each classroom was administered only one of the two surveys. Half of the classrooms in each grade level were administered Set One (the Friends Set) and the other classrooms were administered Set Two (the Not-Friends Set). School administrators selected the time frames in

advance during which the surveys were given for each grade level. The process began in each classroom by giving each student a survey packet. Students were instructed not to write on the assent form or begin the survey until directed. The researcher then read the verbal directions for the assent form and allowed students enough time to read the assent form, check yes or no to indicate if their responses could be used in the research study, print and sign their names, and provide the date. After the assent forms were completed, the researcher read the verbal directions for completing the survey; the directions were designed to be comprehensive and applicable to both sets of the survey. Students were then prompted to begin answering items on the survey and to close the survey packet when they finished. The completed survey packets were then collected by the researcher and taken to a secure location within the school.

Completed survey packets for Set One and Set Two were stacked separately and then sorted with the signed parental permission forms by the primary investigator. Students' survey packets without a signed parental permission form and that did not give assent to their data being used were immediately destroyed by being shredded.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In order to determine the existence of any statistically significant differences in scores between Friends and Not-Friends several independent samples T-Tests were computed. A T-test is used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of two groups. There are several assumptions to t-tests—that data must be independent of one another, the dependent variable is normally distributed within each of the two populations, and the variances of the dependent variable in the two populations are equal. A Levene's test was calculated for each comparison and when it was significant, meaning that the assumption of equal variances was violated, the t-value associated with the equal variances not assumed metric was employed. First, the ratings from the full sample of 110 adolescents were compared to determine if there were any differences between the Friends and Not-Friends groups across the Five Factors of the scale. For this comparison, statistically significant differences were found on two of the five factors. Specifically, the Friends group (M = 3.8) had a statistically higher mean score than the Not-Friends group (M = 2.8) on Factor Four, which measures behaviors in which students are aggressively attempting to show power over someone (t = 2.1, df = 106.8, p = .038). Similarly, the Friends group scored significant higher as a group (M = 2.6) than the Not-Friends group (M = 1.7) on Factor Five, which measures behaviors in which students are attempting to degrade someone's value (t = 1.98, df = 107.1, p = .05). Table 1 summarizes these results.

Next, to determine the existence of any statistically significant differences in scores between Friends and Not-Friends when controlling for sex, another set of independent samples t-tests were calculated. Here, there were no differences between Friends and Not-Friends when only considering males. Similarly, there were no statistically significant differences between Friends and Not-Friends when only examining females, although differences between the two groups were near significance for Factors 4 and 5. Here, the *p* values were .07. Tables 2 and 3 describe these results.

To examine differences between middle schoolers (grades 6, 7, 8) and high schoolers (grades 9, 10, 11, and 12), independent samples t-tests were again calculated. No statistically significant differences between Friends and Not-Friends at either level were found. Tables 4 and 5 provide these results.

Next, independent samples t-tests were calculated to examine any differences between males and females when controlling for set (Friends and Not-Friends). No statistically significant differences between males and females for either set were found. Tables 6 and 7 provide these results.

Lastly, to determine if any statistically significant differences exist between middle schoolers and high schoolers when controlling for set, two additional independent samples t-tests were calculated. No statistically significant differences between middle and high school students were found when considering the Not-Friends set; however, when considering the Friends set, statistically significant differences were found on two of the five factors. Specifically, the high school level (M = 4.0) had a statistically higher mean score than the middle school level (M = 2.4) on Factor Three, which measures behaviors in which students are attempting to embarrass someone (t = 2.10, df = 61, p = .043). Similarly, the high school level (M = 3.6) had a statistically

higher mean score than the middle school level (M = 1.9) on Factor Five, which measures behaviors in which students are attempting to degrade someone's value (t = 2.31, df = 38.3, p = .026). Tables 8 and 9 provide these results.

Discussion

In this study, middle and high school students from rural communities in southern Illinois and western Kentucky were asked to rate how often they engaged in bullying-type behaviors and the social contexts in which they occur—with peers in their group of close friends versus peers who are not in their group of close friends. It was hypothesized that bullying-type behaviors would be exhibited equally or more frequently with peers who were close friends than peers who were not close friends. While there were no significant differences between the two groups on three of the five factors, statistically higher mean scores were identified on two of the factors for the Friends group. These scores indicate that students reported higher frequencies of behaviors involving aggressively attempting to show power over someone and attempting to degrade someone's value, toward peers in their group of close friends than peers not in their group of close friends. Specific examples of behaviors involving aggressively attempting to show power over someone include the following survey items: pushing, shoving, or other horseplay; punching, kicking, slapping, or using some other form of hitting them; and using explicit hand gestures when communicating with them (i.e. holding up the middle finger). Examples of attempting to degrade someone's value include: making fun of others by imitating or mimicking the way they talk or act; using negative facial expressions when communicating with them; and purposely bumping into or brushing against others when they pass in the hallway.

When compared to a previous study published by this author in 2014, the present study additionally included high school students in order to examine if there were any significant

differences in the frequency and forms of behaviors exhibited between middle and high school students. In the present study, it was hypothesized that there would be no significant difference between the forms and frequency of behaviors exhibited by middle school students and high school students. There were no significant differences between the two levels when examining behaviors among peers not in their group of friends; however, when examining behaviors among peers in their group of friends, the mean scores for high school students were significantly higher than the mean scores for middle school students at exhibiting behaviors in which students are attempting to embarrass someone and behaviors in which students are attempting to degrade someone's value. Specific examples of behaviors involving attempting to embarrass someone include the following survey items: making fun of them or greeting them by name-calling; pulling a prank to try to embarrass them; and taunting, jeering, or making jokes about them while talking to them.

Other bullying research studies have identified differences between males and females. Pepler, Jiang, Craig, and Connolly (2008), for example, found that girls were underrepresented in high and moderate level bullying trajectory groups and overrepresented in never-bullying groups. This difference between males and females was explained by the definition given by the instrument, which contained minimal elaboration on the social forms of aggression generally attributed to girls. In a 2012 study, Wang, Iannotti, & Luk found that significantly more boys than girls engaged in all types of bullying behaviors. The present study tested for differences between males and females between social contexts (the Friends and Not-Friends sets) among all five factors, and no statistically significant differences were found between genders. These findings are consistent with the results from the author’s previous study published in 2014.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Implications

This study sought to validate instrumentation for assessing middle and high school students' self-reported perceptions of bullying behaviors and the social contexts in which those behaviors occur. Information was presented on zero-tolerance policies, adolescent development, long-term consequences of bullying, and bullying measures supported by previous research. Cronbach's alpha revealed a high level of internal consistency amongst the items on the instrumentation, and the results of several T-Tests found statistically significant differences between the two groups of social contexts in which bullying behaviors occur.

The validation of this instrumentation will allow it to be utilized in larger settings to investigate adolescent students' perceptions of their own behaviors. By assessing the differences between self-reported behaviors when students are with close friends versus when they are with those who are not their close friends, school administrators can use the data to improve decision-making practices when planning, implementing, and improving school-wide behavior interventions and discipline policies.

In regard to zero-tolerance policies, administrators should use this study as evidence that bullying-type behaviors are broad and can occur in many different social contexts, making zero-tolerance policies inappropriate as a generalized response to incidents involving these types of behaviors. School decision-makers should consider the recommendations made by the APA's Zero Tolerance Task Force, specifically those that recommend taking social and situational context into account, and reserving zero-tolerance policies for only the most severe and serious

disruptive behaviors (Skiba, et al., 2006). Furthermore, administrators should consider students' perceptions of their own behaviors, as previous and current research has indicated that these behaviors are not always intended to be malicious, but instead may be part of a normal culture within groups and may be attributed to typical adolescent psychosocial development (Hale & King, 2014).

The instrumentation used in this study can be utilized to provide a specific measure for administrators when implementing behavioral policies and intervention programs. As previously mentioned, definitions of bullying are broad, and based on observation alone it can be difficult to determine the intent of these behaviors and the contexts in which they occur. Many effective interventions currently exist—both schoolwide and targeted—and most schools have adopted some form of Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS). However, PBIS (2017), according to their own website, is not "…a canned program in a box for purchase" but is a system that is developed to the specific needs of a school. PBIS recommends that schools assess what systems are currently in place, determine whether they are effective, and then decide what needs to be added or improved. This study's instrumentation can provide specific data on the frequency of bullying behaviors, identify specific problem areas that need to be addressed, and provide a means of progress monitoring through administration of the surveys at intervals throughout the school year.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study pertains to the sample population, which was limited to schools and students within the local area of the researcher. All of the participating schools belonged to rural communities in western Kentucky and southern Illinois, reducing the diversity

among participants. Furthermore, the smaller sample size prevented examination for statistical differences between ages and grade levels.

Another limitation of this study relates to the lack of existing research regarding social context in bullying behaviors. Most studies have focused on identifying the frequency and forms of bullying behavior, as well as the psychological effects on bullies and victims. The few studies that include social context generally only examined certain social factors such as the bystander effect, and whether students were more likely to bully in the presence of peers. More measures of social context in bullying behaviors are needed so that comparative studies can be conducted for further analysis.

Future Research

Additional research should be conducted to include both a larger sample size and a more diverse population. Further data analysis of demographics such as age, grade, and race should be conducted in future studies to determine if there are significant differences among these demographics regarding participation in different types of bullying tbehavior. Consideration should also be given for expanding this research to include intermediate/elementary grade levels.

Future studies using this instrumentation would benefit from the addition of two additional sets of the survey to provide measures of victimization. These surveys should ask students to self-report how frequently behaviors are exhibited *to them* while with close friends versus when they are with those who are not their close friends. Comparisons between the measures of bullying and victimization would provide a more detailed analysis of students' behavior and help school administrators improve their efficacy at identification, prevention, and intervention of bullying behaviors.

Table 1

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Friends/Not-Friends for the Entire Sample

Factor	Friends *M* (*n* = 63)	Not-Friends *M* (*n* = 47)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	2.7	2.5	.303	108	.762
2	2.8	2.2	.922	108	.359
3	3.1	2.3	1.264	108	.209
4	3.8	2.8	2.103	106.8	.038*
5	2.6	1.7	1.980	107.1	.050*

N = 110

Table 2

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Friends/Not-Friends for Males for the Entire Sample

Factor	Friends *M* (*n* = 23)	Not-Friends *M* (*n* = 13)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	2.5	2.7	.178	26	.860
2	2.1	2.9	.634	26	.532
3	2.0	1.9	.103	26	.919
4	2.6	2.2	.376	26	.710
5	1.7	1.8	.133	26	.895

N = 46

Table 3

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Friends/Not-Friends for Females for the Entire Sample

Factor	Friends M (n =40)	Not-Friends M (n = 34)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	2.6	2.4	.307	72	.760
2	2.8	2.1	.797	72	.428
3	3.2	2.4	1.200	72	.233
4	4.1	2.9	1.800	72	.071
5	2.7	1.7	1.80	70.2	.071

N = 74

Table 4

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Friends/Not-Friends for the Middle School Sample

Factor	Friends M (n = 38)	Not-Friends M (n = 36)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	2.3	1.9	.745	68.1	.459
2	2.2	2.2	.065	72	.948
3	2.4	1.9	.873	63.8	.386
4	3.2	2.4	1.220	63.5	.226
5	2.0	1.5	.889	72	.377

N = 74

Table 5

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Friends/Not-Friends for the High School Sample

Factor	Friends M (n = 25)	Not-Friends M (n = 11)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	3.2	4.5	.794	34	.433
2	3.6	2.1	.959	34	.344
3	4.0	3.8	.183	34	.856
4	4.7	3.8	1.000	34	.324
5	3.6	2.3	1.250	34	.219

N = 36

Table 6

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Males/Females for Friends Set for the Entire Sample

Factor	M (n = 23)	F (n = 40)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	2.8	2.6	.229	61	.820
2	2.9	2.7	.255	61	.800
3	2.9	3.2	.336	61	.738
4	3.4	4.1	.789	61	.433
5	2.5	2.7	.212	61	.833

N = 63

Table 7

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Males/Females for Not-Friends Set for the Entire Sample

Factor	M (n = 13)	F (n = 34)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	2.9	2.4	.462	45	.646
2	2.4	2.1	.498	45	.767
3	2.2	2.4	.184	45	.855
4	2.3	2.9	.871	45	.388
5	1.8	1.7	.166	45	.869

N = 47

Table 8

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Middle School and High School for the Friends Set

Factor	MS (n = 38)	HS (n = 25)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	2.3	3.2	1.05	61	.299
2	2.2	3.6	1.30	33.4	.201
3	2.4	4.0	2.10	61	.043*
4	3.2	4.7	1.88	61	.065
5	1.9	3.6	2.31	38.3	.026*

N = 63

Table 9

Independent Samples T-Test Comparisons between Middle School and High School for Not-Friends Set

Factor	MS (n = 36)	HS (n = 11)	*t*	*df*	*p*
1	1.9	4.5	1.73	11.2	.110
2	2.2	3.1	.098	45	.922
3	1.9	1.9	1.73	11.9	.110
4	2.4	2.1	2.00	45	.054
5	1.5	2.3	1.00	45	.321

N = 47

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