The Prevalence of Bullying in Post-Secondary Institutions

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Abstract

Bullying in the workplace, primary schools and secondary educational institutions has been studied extensively by experts in the field. The bullying that takes place in institutions of higher learning has been overlooked and therefore, requires more attention from researchers. This study investigated the nature and frequency of bullying and cyber-bullying on college campuses. A sample (n = 149) of college students completed a modified version of the Bullying Scale for Adults (BSFA). The results showed an acknowledgement by students that bullying does exist on college campuses. In contrast, the same students' responses regarding the frequency of bullying on college campuses were identified as never or once. It was concluded that more research is needed to understand the meaning and connotations of the terms *bullying* and *cyber-bullying* to college students.

Keywords: *Bullying; Cyber-bullying; Post-secondary; Adults*

Introduction

Bullying is a dire issue affecting many parts of the world [1,2,3]. In times past bullying was viewed by many as a rite of passage or a normal part of growing up. The perception of bullying as innocuous conduct is no longer considered valid. Bullying has led to horrific tragedies which have made national headlines and captured the attention of many. The extreme emotional pain victims of bullying experience can lead to suicide and other violent outcomes. Concerned individuals have directed much of their attention to students enrolled in primary and secondary schools [4]. The first significant investigation of bullying was conducted by Dr. Dan Olweus in the 1970s. His well-designed study on bullying examined thousands of Norwegian and Swedish students in elementary and secondary schools [3,5]. The results suggested that bullying was extant in many Scandinavian schools with 7% of all students acting as bullies from the 2nd through the 9th grade.

Bullying is aggressive behavior used to inflict harm, cause embarrassment or to intimidate. There is always an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim. Bullies use a number of tactics to harm their victims such as physical aggression which can include punching, hitting and kicking. Bullies also attack verbally using threats, gossip, name-calling and taunting in order to cause their victims pain. In addition, victims are often socially excluded and made to feel isolated [5]. Olweus' research found that the frequency of bullying dropped in each advancing grade. The percentage of bullying decreased from 15% in the 2nd grade to 5% in the 9th grade. As a student progressed in school, the probability of being bullied by classmates decreased [1,2,6,7]. Olweus' research on bullying in Scandinavian schools closely resembles the research that has been conducted in schools across the United States.

At one time it was accepted that bullying just occurred during a certain phase of childhood [8]. It was assumed that it only happened when children were at school or was playing in the absence of adult supervision [9]. These are now considered antiquated views. The many years of bullying research have led to the conclusion that bullying behaviors extend well-beyond adolescence [8]. There are students attending institutions of higher learning who terrorize their fellow classmates using classic bullying tactics [9]. In the United States bullying became a hot topic in the 1990s and research on the subject began to pick up speed. Experts now are aware that bullying is widespread, occurring in both public and private schools. Bullying has been documented at the college-level and beyond into the workplace

[10]. Many innocent children were injured, traumatized and even killed in recent school shootings. After these violent episodes, bullying research was pushed to the forefront again. It has been found that many of the perpetrators of these heinous crimes were earlier victims of bullying. Some of these shootings were acts of revenge and these so-called "classroom avengers" were delivering payback for their earlier victimization [4]. Bullying can take several forms but the most noticeable are physical assaults and verbal insults. A subtler, yet just as harmful, type of bullying is relational which includes gossiping, ostracization and *cyber-bullying*. The major difference between bullying and cyber-bullying is that the latter tends to take place outside of educational settings. Cyber-bullying uses technology with the intent to harm or damage an individual's reputation. Emails, texting, social media and other websites are used to disseminate negative and disparaging information about a particular person. Caucasian girls between the ages of 12 -17 years are the most commonly targeted demographic. Only 10% of these cyber-bullying victims report the malicious acts [9].

At one-time people used the term "bullying" to describe incidents that only occurred in school during the day. Technologies have developed in the recent past which offer bullies' new avenues for asserting their dominance and harassing victims. One specific form of cyber-bullying is cyber-stalking. The victim of *cyber-stalking* is stalked online through websites, chat rooms, discussion forums, blogs, emails and other forms of social media. The perpetrator closely monitors the intended victim's online activity while compiling information to use against the victim. The cyber-stalker may intimidate their victim using threats or verbal abuse online [11]. There are various ways cyber-stalkers instill fear in their victims. Online stalkers sometimes send threatening or spiteful emails repetitively to an individual. They may use Facebook, Craigslist or even chat rooms to post statements that cause their victims distress or fear. Cyber-stalkers may manipulate, hack into or take control of a victim's computer. This enables the bully to track all of the victim's computer activity [9]. This new wave of bullying can affect anyone who goes online or uses a computer. Victims are not limited to a particular age group or demographic [12].

A survey of 713 students from 48 states identified categories of students in relation to cyber-bullying. Those surveyed can be described as one of the following: *pure offender, pure victim, offender and victim, and neither offender nor victim*. Students who have bullied at least one time online but have not experienced bullying online are pure offenders. Students who have not bullied others online but have experienced bullying online are pure victims. A student who has participated in bullying online and has also been bullied online is an offender and victim. The final category, neither offender nor victim, consists of students who have never been bullied and have never participated in online bullying [9].

In 1995 the National Household Education Survey was administered to 6,500 students enrolled in grades 6 through 12. The objective was to see how often students were being bullied and in which grades bullying was the most prevalent. The results suggested that 13% of 6th graders reported being bullied and victimized, while only 2.9% of 12th graders made such reports [13].

In 2001, 8,400 students in grades 6 through 12 were surveyed about their bullying experiences. It was found that 10.5% of 6th graders and 1.2% of 12th graders have been bullied. The likelihood that a student (grades 6 to 12) will be victimized by a bully decreases as they advance in their education. It is worth noting that there are a number of other bullying studies which had vastly different results.

The now-outdated idea that bullying is limited to childhood has been discarded and researchers are now finding that many adults suffer from it at the college level [8]. Still some scholars and investigators exclude bullying at the adult level from their studies. Adult bullying is a major problem throughout the world and the number of victims continue to rise [14]. Research conducted in Scandinavian countries revealed that the adult bullying rate had climbed from 3.5% to 16% [15].

Bullying in higher education has been overlooked and lacks thorough research [8]. However, there are some noteworthy studies that have examined college bullying. A group of researchers in 2004 wanted to know if bullying actually existed at the college level. In their study they examined 1,025 undergraduate students and found that 24.6% of these college students had been bullied. The research also showed that over 70% of the students who were bullied in high school and elementary school had been victims of bullying in college [16].

Recent research concluded that all ages are subject to getting bullied. Bullies and their victims can be detected in almost every institution. In a different study it was found that approximately 10% of students in higher education have experienced some form of bullying [17]. The staggering numbers of bullying victims beg researchers to conduct more studies and find solutions to this widespread problem.

Some educational institutions have vague policies in place for bullying. There are many that lack concrete plans for dealing with bullying and staff often fumbles to find solutions on their own.

College campuses and their classroom environments are conducive to bullying. The large classrooms bring individuals together from all walks of life. There is often racial tension, socio-economic differences, students with various learning disabilities and complex gender politics which all set the stage for bullying. The faculty often lack appropriate training, leaving students vulnerable to bullying [17]. A study of 1,025 undergraduates found that bullying continued to be an issue throughout college. The reports from that study indicated that 8.5% were bullied at least once or twice, 5% were occasionally bullied and 1.15% were bullied frequently [16].

In 2010, the Rutgers University freshman, Tyler Clementi, jumped off the George Washington Bridge in New Jersey after being cyber-bullied by his roommate. This story exposed the real dangers of cyber-bullying and brought the issue to the attention of many people across the globe. Bullies often select victims who are social misfits. The victims are often people who struggle to navigate social environments with ease [4]. Many bullies are socially competent individuals who use their victims to accomplish specific goals. The bullies are careful not to alienate their friends while they are harming their victims.

According to Hughes, bullies possess certain personality traits which are correlated with violent behaviors. Bullies tend to have relatively positive attitudes towards violence and aggression. They often have histories of resolving conflict with aggression and violence. These behaviors have been directly linked to delinquency in the school system. Male bullies are often diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder [5]. These men are inclined to commit criminal acts and frequently are convicted of crimes as adults. One study found that 70% of the children who bullied in elementary school were convicted of crimes by the age of 24 [5].

Another remarkable study found that people who bully were more likely to have grown up in homes where corporeal punishment was inflicted to control behavior. The parents of bullies tend to be uninvolved in their children's daily activities and withhold affection from them [18]. Bullies often seek out friends who have similar aggressive proclivities [4]. If the existence and occurrence of bullying are presented at the collegiate level, the pervious literature may contribute to the source.

The various roles of people involved in bullying situations have been identified by researchers. These roles include the following: *bully, victim, bully-victim and the bystander*. The role of the bully is to inflict harm on another individual and that individual is the victim. A bully-victim has been subjected to bullying and has demonstrated bullying behaviors. The bystander is a person who is present during the act of bullying but is silent, inactive and simply observes the situation [4].

Victims of bullying often suffer from depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, severe anxiety and phobias relating to showing up for school. The victims sometimes possess negative attitudes towards violent behavior and if the victim is a male, he is more likely to be physically weaker than other children his age [18]. Bullying victims tend to experience academic difficulties, struggle to function in school settings and earn lower grades. They often become withdrawn and lose their desire to participate in social activities [5]. In college, victims have difficulty forming friendships with others and are often ignored when they tell others about being bullied. They often do not know how protect themselves or ask for intervention from authority figures [4].

It is certain that bullying is a pervasive problem and victims are tortured everyday in this country and elsewhere. Bullying is not a behavior that can be explained by a passing childhood phase. The definition of a bully has expanded from a child who picks on other children to a person of any age who causes emotional or physical harm. Bullying persists well into adulthood and can be found in a variety of settings. It has been identified in environments outside academic institutions such as the Internet. Findings suggest that college-age

students are bullied and many suffer in silence. Bullying in places of higher learning is an under-researched topic that is finally getting the attention it deserves. Scholars must delve deeper to understand the nature of bullying so that solutions to this far-reaching problem can be developed.

Statement of the Problem

Bullying has become a major concern in American society. Many adults are suffering from bullying in their workplaces and colleges. While childhood bullying has been the focus of many scholars, bullying on college campuses has not been well studied. The present study was created to understand the occurrence and existence of bullying on college campuses.

Purpose of the Study

The intention of this study was to investigate the existence and occurrence of bullying on a university campus. In order to better address bullying on an elementary, middle and high school level, it is imperative to conduct research that addresses and understands bullying on the adult level. According to Bandura, children observe and model what they see. If the adults are bullies and are very aggressive toward others, then the children or child may imitate that same behavior and may bully and become aggressive toward others. By identifying bullying on college campuses, scholars will be able to focus more attention and efforts toward addressing bullying among adults.

Significance of the Study

Conducting research that considers all areas of bullying on college campuses is imperative to providing a hands-on approach for educating college students in the 21st century [16]. Attention toward the topic of bullying in American schools has increased significantly in the past few years. It may be due to cyber-bullying or the recent incidents of school killings in the United States, which clearly show that students who have been bullied in school are more likely to be involved in school violence [10]. Kimmel and Mahler has reported that nearly all of the incidents of random shooting involved male perpetrators. Each male in their study reported being harassed by others because he did not live up to the prescribed role of a man. These incidents as well as others have led to the development of new legislations that are aimed at tackling school violence and addressing bullying in schools.

This is a trend that has been recently reignited by a number of visible suicides that were linked to bullying and harassment Vaillancourt, 2012. Over the past 10 years, research observing the negative and long term consequences of bullying has grown incredibly and placed increased pressure on schools, school systems and government officials to develop and implement effective policies and practices to address bullying Vaillancourt, 2012. To combat the growing concerns surrounding the implication of bullying, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services co-hosted the Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention Summit in 2010. This summit brought many government officials, researchers, policy makers and education practitioners together to discuss ways to effectively address bullying in schools. The summit also highlighted the need for more comprehensive information regarding bullying and bullying legislation in the states and in the schools.

In addition to the summit, the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights exhibited a letter reminding all schools that bullying and harassment violate federal antidiscrimination laws (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2010). There are two pieces of proposed legislation that were created to address bullying and harassment in schools. President Barrack Obama and his administration have endorsed each of the pieces of legislation to address issues of bullying and harassment in schools. The President and his administration believe that there is a lot of work that needs to be done before the bills can become law, but the administration believes with continued advocacy and research, they can get closer to ensuring that all schools are implementing policy and practices to reduce bullying and harassment (U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2011; Vaillancourt, 2012). This study offers researchers, university officials and government officials the opportunity to look at students' behavior toward bullying on a college level. The study will hope to show that bullying still exists in adulthood and that more focus needs to be placed on college campuses as well as in primary and secondary communities. The findings from this research study may provide a boost to the lack of research regarding bullying on a collegiate level.

This study present provides rich literature that shows the prevalence of bullying and cyber-bullying on college campuses. By properly understanding and recognizing the existence and occurrence of bullying and cyber-bullying, future literature may find supportive ways to change adults and children's perceptions towards bullying.

The present study is very diverse and adds to many disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, school psychology and social work. This study offers researchers, university officials and government officials the opportunity to look at students' behavior toward bullying on a college level.

Assumptions

It is the assumption of the researcher that the sample population of students in the study only represented a portion of the students at the university. It is also the assumption of the researchers that more collegiate females are subjected to bullying and cyber-bullying than collegiate males.

Research Questions

1. Does bullying and cyber-bullying exist on college/university campuses?
2. How often does bullying and cyber-bullying occur on college/university campuses?

Operational Definitions

Bullying is defined as a chronic form of victimization which is characterized by an unprovoked attempt to harm the other individual, which can also include an individual or group teasing or harassing another person [19,20]. Cyber-bullying- is the intentional use of electronic communicative devices like cell phones, email, and social networks to bully and cause harm to one's peers [21].

Methodology

The current study utilized descriptive statistics to examine the existence and occurrence of bullying and cyberbullying. The participants within this study consisted of traditional-aged and nontraditional-aged undergraduate and graduate collegiate students. This descriptive research design was implemented to examine the demographics (gender, traditional age, vs. non-traditional age, ethnic group, classification, and marital status) and the existence and occurrence of bullying and cyber-bullying among students on a collegiate level.

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 149 undergraduate and graduate students from various universities. General power analysis suggested that 100 students would be an adequate effect size for this research. For the purpose of this study, 149 undergraduate and graduate students were used to measure the existence and frequency of bullying on college campuses.

Measures

The instrument used in this research was a two-part, self-reporting questionnaire that was created and designed by the author to measure the existence and occurrence of bullying which included social, verbal, and physical and cyber-bullying. The first section of the questionnaire was designed to collect demographic data which included gender, age (traditional vs. nontraditional), ethnic group, classification, and marital status. The second part of the self-reporting questionnaire was designed to measure the existence, as well as the occurrence of bullying and cyber-bullying from elementary/middle school through undergraduate and graduate school. A 5 point Likert Scale was used to indicate the levels of agreement within each statement (1 = Never, 2 = Once, 3 = A Few Times, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always). In addition, the yes (1) and no (2) responses were used to examine the existence and occurrence of bullying and cyberbullying on college campuses.

Data Collection

The researchers were responsible for dissemination and discussion of the study with the prospective participants. The survey package consisted of the questionnaire and information that assisted the prospective participants in deciding whether to participate in the study.

There was no incentive to participate, and participants were given the opportunity to decline participation and to discontinue at any point during the survey. The data analysis incorporates a univariate measure using descriptive statistics. The mean and standard deviation was used to identify the demographics, existence and occurrence of bullying.

Results

Participants

One hundred forty-nine (N = 149) undergraduate and graduate students from psychology, sociology and social work courses participated in the research study. Surveys were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) student version 18.0 and BSFA (Bullying Scale for Adults). In addition, the following demographics were analyzed; age, race, and gender and college classification. Males represented 28.9% of the sampled population (n = 43), while females represented 71% (n = 106) of the undergraduate and graduate sampled population. The classification was as followed; Freshman, 47.7% (n = 70); Sophomore, 21.5 % (n = 32); Junior, 6% (n = 9); Senior, 6% (n = 9); Graduate, 18.8% (n = 28). In addition, this study examined ages 17 and under, 2% (n = 3); 18-20, 58.4% (n = 87); 21-23, 16.8% (n = 25); 24-30 (n = 25)16.8%; 31 or older, 6% (n = 9). Lastly, the ethnicity was examined within the sample population. Black, 72.5% (n = 108); Caucasian, 17.4% (n = 26); Asian, 2% (n = 3); Hispanic, 2% (n = 3) and other races, 4% (n = 6). Please refer to appendix A regarding the demographic frequencies. Table 1 summarizes the frequencies, means and standard deviations of the demographics.

Dependent	M	SD
Variables		
Gender	1.71	.45
Marital Status	1.26	1.09
Race/Ethnicity	2.44	.95
Age	2.66	.98
Classification	2.28	1.55

Table1: Demographic for Descriptive of Undergraduate and Graduate Students.

Notes: Gender (1 = Female 2 = Males), Marital Status (1 = Single, 2 = Married, 3 = Divorce, 4 = Separated), Ethnic Background (1 = Native American, 2 = Black, 3 = Caucasian, 4 = Asian, 5 = Hispanic) Age (1 = 17 & under, 2 = 18 - 20, 3 = 21-23, 4 = 24 - 30, 5 = 31 & older), Classification (1 = Freshman, 2 = Sophomore, 3 = Junior, 4 = Senior)

Findings

Research Question 1

Does bullying and cyber-bullying exist on a college/university campus?

SPSS Descriptive Statistics was used for the main analysis to look at means and standard deviations for the existence of bullying and cyber-bullying on college campuses.

Statements	M	SD
Have you ever been cyber-bullied in college?	1.89	0.31
Have you ever been bullied in college?	1.94	0.24

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Bullying and Cyber-bullying

Notes: 1 = Yes, I have been bullied and cyber-bullied in college; 2 = No, I have not been bullied or cyber-bullied in college.

Research Question 2

How often does bullying and cyber-bullying occur on college/university campuses?

SPSS Descriptive Statistics was used for the main analysis to look at means and standard deviations for the existence of bullying and cyber-bullying on college campuses.

Statements	M	SD
I have verbally bullied others as an adult	1.21	0.65
*Have you ever been cyber-bullied in college	1.89	0.31
*Have you ever cyber-bullied others as an adult	1.97	0.16
I have been cyber-bullied as an adult	1.16	0.51
I have cyber-bullied others as an adult	1.07	0.39
*Have you ever been bullied in college	1.94	0.24
*Have you ever bullied others in college	1.98	0.14
Have you ever been bullied as an adult	1.87	0.33
Have you ever bullied others as an adult	1.93	0.25
I have been physically bullied as an adult	1.08	0.37
I have physically bullied others as an adult	1.14	0.47
I have been socially bullied as an adult	1.23	0.60
I have socially bullied others as an adult	1.08	0.38
I have seen bullying often in college	1.34	0.77

Table 3: Occurrences of Bullying on University Campuses

*Note: (5 point Likert Scale) 1 = Never, 2 = Once, 3 = A Few Times, 4 = Several Times, 5 = Many times. Note: * 1= Yes, 2= No*

Discussion

Few scholars acknowledge bullying and cyber-bullying among adults. This is possibly due to the overabundance of literature on childhood bullying [8]. Childhood bullying is a very vital issue that must be addressed. However, bullying is not only a concern among children; it is also a constant problem among adults in the workplace and in higher education. Nevertheless, the majority of scholars have deemed bullying to be a childhood behavior that decreases over time. However, the finding from The National Educational Survey and previous scholars does not equate to the results of the present study nor the findings from few scholars who believe bullying does exist in postsecondary institutions.

Impact of Study

From the results, students agreed (M = 1.94, SD = .24) that bullying exists on college campuses. In addition, students agreed (M = 1.89, SD = .31) that cyber-bullying exists on college campuses.

Previous writings suggest that bullying is more prevalent among children than adults and the percentage of being bullied decreased with age, lowering from 15% in the 2nd grade to 1.2% in the 12th grade. In addition, many scholars believe that bullying does not occur on college campuses and avoid conducting research pertaining to college bullying. However, the present study revealed that bullying and cyber-bullying does exist on college/university campuses as students have reported being bullied and cyber-bullied while in college. However, students reported that the occurrence of bullying as an adult was either never or close to once. More research is needed on understanding the term of bullying among different ethnic groups. Bullying is still considered a universal term. By properly understanding the term and specific cultures, researchers and participants can better identify what bullying look like and how often it occurs on campuses. Even though results indicate that bullying exist on college campuses. It is our assumption that students may not understand the different forms of bullying (physical, verbal and relational) and as a result, the participants could not describe the frequency of bullying.

Recommendations

There were many statistical results in this study. The occurrence and existence of bullying and cyber-bullying on a college campus is evident and like elementary and high schools it is imperative that prevention programs involve not only students, but faculty and staff.

Higher education institutions could benefit from implementing a prevention program like the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBiS) framework. This program creates systems of support to include the entire school, the classroom and the individual student, to ensure safety of students and prevent behaviors associated with bullying. School wide programs should discourage inappropriate behavior and encourage positive social skills. Classroom programs focus on skills training, adult supervision and positive feedback. Individual support involves one on one behavior intervention, mental health support, and individualized behavior intervention planning [22].

Appendix A: Demographics/frequencies

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	43	28.9	28.9	28.9
	Female	106	71.1	71.1	100.0
	Total	149	100.0	100.0	

Table 1: Demographic of Gender.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	American Indian	1	0.7	0.7	0.7
	African American	108	72.5	73.5	74.1
	Caucasian	26	17.4	17.7	91.8
	Asian	3	2.0	2.0	93.9
	Hispanics	3	2.0	2.0	95.9
	other	6	4.0	4.1	100.0
	Total	147	98.7	100.0	
Missing	System	2	1.3		
Total		149	100.0		

Table 2: Demographic of Ethnic Background.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	17 or under	3	2.0	2.0	2.0
	18-20	87	58.4	58.4	60.4
	21-23	25	16.8	16.8	77.2
	24-30	25	16.8	16.8	94.0
	31 or older	9	6.0	6.0	100.0
	Total	149	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: Demographic of Age.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Freshmen	70	47.0	47.3	47.3
	Sophomore	32	21.5	21.6	68.9
	Junior	9	6.0	6.1	75.0
	Senior	9	6.0	6.1	81.1
	Graduate Student	28	18.8	18.9	100.0
	Total	148	99.3	100.0	
Missing	System	1	0.7		
Total		149	100.0		

Table 4: *Demographic of Classification.*

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