


SPR 18th Annual Meeting

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Category/Theme: Context and Prevention

Examining the link between school climate and forms of aggression: A latent class approach

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Studies indicate that aggressive youth perceive their environment and peer interactions differently than other youth. Social-cognitive theory suggests that these differences in perceptions of the social context may contribute to the way in which youth resolve conflict, and possibly even the form of aggression employed. For example, youth who perceive the school environment as unsafe may be more inclined to respond using physical aggression (PA), but a different set of social-contextual factors may be associated with relational (RA) forms of aggression. Having an enhanced understanding of the social context in which peer victimization occurs, and its potential link with particular forms of aggression may elucidate possible targets for school-based preventive interventions.

We used latent class analysis (LCA) to examine intraindividual variation in the forms of bullying behaviors perpetrated. We were particularly interested in possible gender differences in the forms of aggression perpetrated and the association between perceptions of climate and latent class membership. Participants included 6,534 adolescents (grades 6-12) who reported that they had bullied someone during the past month using up to 10 possible behaviors (e.g., ignoring, rumors, hitting, cyber-bully, threatening).

A 3-class model best fit for MS youth, whereas a 2-class model best fit for HS youth. The largest class had a low probability of endorsing all forms of perpetration (low class) except the verbal forms of aggression (VA). A small class, which had a high probability of endorsing most forms of aggression, was also found (high class). A number of gender differences emerged among the MS youth, such that girls in the high class tended to employ mostly PA and VA, whereas the boys in the high class tended to endorse all 10 forms (PA, RA, & VA). However, no gender differences emerged among the HS youth. Furthermore, feeling unsafe at school, perceiving that adults do not do enough to prevent bullying, and perceiving that the interventions are ineffective were predictive of membership in the high class for both genders and MS and HS youth.

These results underscore the importance of prevention and intervention programming that addresses the school climate in order to reduce school violence and peer victimization. These findings also highlight the variety of forms of bullying which are common among youth, and variation by age and gender. The link between perceptions of the school climate and bullying behaviors warrants further examination in order to identify specific targets for preventive interventions.

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