

## Psychosocial Functioning of Bullied Youth Who Adopt Versus Deny the Bully-Victim Label

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This study addressed a need for research on the association between adopting or denying the label of bully victim and students' psychosocial functioning. Participants were 1,063 students in Grades 5, 7, and 9 in a school district in the northeastern United States. Students were grouped based on their pattern of responses to (a) the California Bully Victimization Scale (Felix et al., 2011), which does not use the term "bully," but includes behavioral items assessing frequency of peer victimization and whether or not that victimization involved any perceived power disadvantage, and (b) the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Solberg & Olweus, 2003; Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007), which queries self-identification as a bully victim. We compared groups using a series of planned comparisons with ANOVA on self-reported emotional distress and withdrawal, behavioral reactivity and conduct problems, and prosocial behavior and peer competence, as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). Results revealed complexities regarding the experience of bullying. The perception of a power difference and having been bullied both related to psychosocial functioning in an interactive way, suggesting that both are important to query. Moreover, students who labeled themselves as victims of bullying reported poorer psychosocial functioning than those who had the experience of being bullied but did not adopt that label.

**Keywords:** victimization, bullying, mental health, school, measurement

A growing body of evidence has compellingly demonstrated that bullying is associated with negative outcomes for both bullies and victims (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Research indicates that being the victim of bullying is associated with severe symptoms of mental

health problems in children and has long lasting effects that can persist until late adolescence and even adulthood (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013). However, research has insufficiently investigated students' interpretations of their experiences of bully victimization and how these underlying psychological mechanisms might be related to psychosocial functioning. Therefore, this study examined self-perceptions of bully-victim status and how this relates to psychosocial functioning.

Bully victimization is a subset of all possible peer victimizations. Many youths experience one-time victimizations or victimizations spaced widely over time. These youths have experienced victimization, but without the added elements of intentionality, frequency (2–3 times per month or more; Solberg & Olweus, 2003), and perceived power disadvantage compared with the bully; thus, by definition,

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they would not be considered bully victims. This is an important and empirically-validated distinction, as research has demonstrated that students who are bully victims report significantly diminished positive psychological health (e.g., life satisfaction, hope) compared to students who have experienced victimization that is not to the level of bullying (Felix, Sharkey, Green, Furlong, & Tanigawa, 2011; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014). For students who experience infrequent victimization, circumstances might not compel them to consider and resolve the question, "Why is this happening to me?" In contrast, a youth who suffers repeated victimization within a confined time span might start to internalize the reasons for being targeted and what the victimization implies about who they are as individuals. Some youths who experience repeated, targeted (i.e., bullied) victimization might be able to buffer their self-identities from these experiences and others might not be able to; based on their repeated victimization experiences, members of the latter group come to assume the stigmatizing label of bully victim as part of their self-identities (Rosen, Milich, & Harris, 2007).

In this study, we explore differences in psychosocial outcomes between students who do and do not assume the label of bully victim. In the following section, we summarized the literature regarding victimization and psychosocial functioning, methods of assessment of victimization, the possible influence of social stigma on the experience of victimization, the effects of self-perceived victimization, and the role of power disadvantage in bully victimization.

### Victimization and Psychosocial Functioning

Children who are targets of bullying are at risk for developing a multitude of adjustment problems (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Ttofi, Bowes, Farrington, & Lösel, 2014). Cuadrado and Fernández (2009) suggested that children have different behavioral responses to victimization, depending on the nature of the bullying. Specifically, children who were victims of aggressive bullying showed greater aggression than victims of other forms of bullying. Yen et al. (2010) found that children who were exclusively bully victims showed high rates of internalization problems, whereas victims who were also perpetrators had high rates of both inter-

nalization and externalization problems. Externalizing problems related to bully victimization include fighting (Nansel et al., 2001), hyperactivity and inattention (ADHD; Wiener & Mak, 2009), and aggression (Cuadrado & Fernández, 2009). Hawker and Boulton (2000) conducted a meta-analytic review of peer victimization and psychosocial maladjustment that revealed medium mean effect sizes for the association between victimization and depression ( $r$ s from .29–.45), loneliness ( $r$ s from .25–.32), and global self-esteem ( $r$ s from .21–.39). Victimization and anxiety also had significant mean effect sizes ( $r$ s from .19–.25). Furthermore, exposure to bullying has also been related to suicidal ideation and attempts (Brunstein Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007).

Often victims are not only bullied, but are also rejected by their broader group of peers (e.g., Lopez & Dubois, 2005). Children with peer-relationship problems and/or a lack of social support experience more bullying than youth with social support (Tanigawa, Furlong, Felix, & Sharkey, 2011). Nansel et al. (2001) examined the association between numerous psychosocial outcomes and bullying status and found that poorer peer relationships and higher levels of loneliness were related to being both a bully and a victim of bullying. Being bullied was also negatively related to the ability to make new friends.

### Assessment of Victimization

Given the serious psychosocial problems related to the experience of being bullied, it is essential to establish the reliability and validity of those bullying assessments used when evaluating and implementing school-based interventions for children who have been victimized by peers (Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Kras, 2013). The use of different definitions of bully victimization and measurement strategies makes it difficult to know which aspect of being bullied is related to poorer psychosocial functioning. Self-report, the most common method of determining whether or not someone has experienced bullying, can be definition-based and/or behavior-based; both approaches have their own respective strengths and weaknesses.

Definition-based self-report measures provide a definition of bullying and ask youth if and how often they have experienced this type

of (bullied) victimization (e.g., Bully/Victim Questionnaire [BVQ]; Olweus, 1996). Scholars have suggested that definition-based methods might produce underreporting because of the embarrassment or stigma attached to the words *bully* or *victim* (Furlong, Sharkey, Felix, Tanigawa, & Green, 2010). To address this potential limitation of definition-based bullying measures, behavior-based strategies for measuring bullying have been developed (e.g., California Bully Victimization Scale [CBVS]; Felix et al., 2011), which do not use or define the word “bullying,” but present a list of victimization-related behaviors and ask how often the youth either has experienced them (bully victim), committed them (bully), or both (bully–victim). Follow-up questions assess intentionality and power imbalance to differentiate bully victimization from the broader scope of peer victimization in a way that is consistent with the widely adopted core elements of the bullying definition (intentionally harmful victimization, victimizations repeated over time, and victims’ feelings of disempowerment to defend themselves; Hanish et al., 2013). There is evidence that definition- and behavior-based approaches identify different groups of victims (Felix et al., 2011), which has implications for decisions related to interpreting research and selecting youth for intervention. We hypothesize that differences in who is identified as a bully victim between definition- and behavior-based strategies are accounted for by how the youths make sense of their victimization experiences; that is, whether or not they have come to adopt what we call the bully-victim label and, thus, describe themselves as bully victims.

### Social Stigma and Underreporting

Emerging research on youth victimization has shown that youth may underreport their experiences of victimization due to the stigma associated with it (Sawyer, Bradshaw, & O’Brennan, 2008). Sawyer et al. (2008) determined that minority youth (i.e., African American middle school boys and girls, Asian middle school boys, and African American high school girls) were less likely than their White counterparts to report being bullied on a definition-based single-item measure, but were more likely to report experiencing at least one form of bullying on a behavior-based measure. This par-

allels findings from existing sexual harassment literature that individuals who were sexually harassed commonly endorsed behavioral experiences associated with sexual harassment, but often denied *being* sexually harassed when asked directly (Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald, & Waldo, 1998). Hence, it appears that asking individuals to assume a “victim” label as part of their self-identity elicits more than an objective behavioral description of experiences because it reflects victims’ subjective interpretations of the social and psychological meaning of the victimization as well (Greif & Furlong, 2006). Given that there might be barriers to youth self-reporting bully victimization, our study focuses on psychosocial implications for youths who do in comparison to those who do not self-ascribe as bully victims.

### Effects of Self-Perceived Victimization

It is one thing for a youth to acknowledge that someone else has beaten or harassed them multiple times, but it would seem to have far greater psychological import when youths also conclude that the meaning of the victimization is that they are victims of *bullying*, a term that many consider to be akin to being a weak and ineffectual person. Graham and Juvonen (1998) investigated self-blame and peer victimization in a sample of sixth- and seventh-grade students. The students were asked to identify individuals who get picked on or pushed about by others (i.e., peer nomination). Respondents also completed a questionnaire that assessed self-perceptions of victim status, attributions for hypothetical incidents of victimization, feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, and self-worth. Self-perceived victimization was associated with self-blame, loneliness, low self-esteem, and anxiety—all consistent with the hypothesis that adopting the bully-victim label is part of a more general self-deprecating self-identity. Peer-perceived victimization was associated with peer rejection. Although many self-identified bully victims are also identified by their peers, reports are inconsistent. Graham and Juvonen defined *paranoids* as students with self-reported but not peer-reported victimization and *deniers* as those with peer-reported but not self-reported victimization. Psychological functioning of paranoids appeared similar to consistent victims; in contrast, the functioning of deniers was similar

to that of nonvictims. This suggests that a youth's self-identification as a bully victim might be more predictive of negative outcomes than being perceived as a bully victim by peers. What has yet to be studied is the consistency between self-identification as a bully victim with self-reported behavioral (rather than peer) identification of being a bully victim and how these experiences relate to psychosocial functioning.

### **Power Disadvantage and the Bully-Victim Label**

Another neglected area of bullying research is the association between the presence of a power disadvantage between bully and victim and the adoption of the bully-victim label. An imbalance in power between the victim and the aggressor is a hallmark of the definition of bullying (Olweus, 1996), as this imbalance is what makes it difficult for the person being victimized to put up a defense and make the bullying stop (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Greif & Fur-long, 2006). Power disadvantage can take on many forms, including the bully being older, more popular, or stronger (Rodkin & Berger, 2008). However, some prior studies have questioned the consistency with which youth integrate this quality of power into their personal conceptualizations of bullying and how they make sense of their own bullying experiences. For example, Vaillancourt et al. (2008) asked students to provide a definition of bullying and found that only 26% of students spontaneously mentioned a power disadvantage as part of the definition. Cuadrado-Gordillo (2012) found that aggressors, but not victims, tended to include power imbalance in their personal perceptions of bullying. Further, using the same data set as the current study, Green et al. (2013) found that children's endorsement of a definitional bullying item was significantly associated with reporting repeated peer victimization, but not if children reported victimization by someone more powerful than themselves. These findings point to the need to further explore the role of perceived power disadvantage in how children understand and interpret bullying experiences, and whether or not a perceived imbalance of power is associated with poorer psychosocial functioning.

### **Summary and Research Objectives**

Of importance to this study is the conjunction of two overlapping but distinct aspects of bullying identified by studies undertaken to better understand the psychometric properties of behavioral versus definitional bully-victim measures: (a) the perception of being victimized by a peer who has a perceived power advantage and accepting the term bully victim to describe the experience and (b) the acknowledgement of being victimized by someone who had a power advantage, yet not accepting the bullied label. We propose that this self-definition difference might relate to how bully victims experience and psychologically make sense of their victimization, and that it is the combination of experienced power disadvantage and the bully-victim self-schema that is most strongly associated with diminished psychosocial functioning.

We developed a series of hypotheses to test this proposal. First, we explored if students who adopt the bully-victim label have poorer psychosocial functioning, and in which areas (internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and peer competence), than students who report no victimization. We tested this association separately for students who did and did not report a perceived power difference to explore how power difference affected the association. Specifically, we hypothesized that among students who reported repeated bully victimization on the CBVS, (a) those who adopted the bully-victim label and reported a perceived power difference would have poorer psychosocial functioning than students who reported no victimization and (b) those who adopted the bully-victim label but denied a perceived power difference would also have poorer psychosocial functioning than students who reported no victimization. Next, we hypothesized that (c) students who adopted the bully-victim label and reported a perceived power difference would have the worst psychosocial functioning compared with all other students who had also experienced repeated victimization. Finally, we hypothesized that the psychological impact of acknowledging a power disadvantage might interact with adopting the bullied label. That is, among students who reported repeated bully victimization on the CBVS, (d) those who denied a perceived power difference would report



poorer psychosocial functioning if they also reported being bully victims, and (e) those who did report a perceived power difference would report poorer psychosocial functioning if they also reported being a bully victim.

## Method

### Participants

Eight schools in a district just outside a major city in the northeast United States administered a bullying survey as part of a district-wide effort to reduce peer victimization. The eight schools included seven K–8 schools as well as the district high school. All students in Grades 5, 7, and 9 ( $n = 1,235$ ) were invited to participate and a letter was sent home to parents using passive consent procedures. Students were brought by their teachers to a computer lab to complete the anonymous web-based survey. The online survey was initiated 1,246 times; however, 122 of these initiations were for 0 s (perhaps reflecting teachers demonstrating for their students, problems with Internet access, or students choosing not to complete the survey). Additional surveys were completed in fewer than 120 s and, given the median completion time of 11 min, were excluded from analysis. This yielded a total of 1,088 completed surveys, all of which included adequate responses to code participants into a victimization category using the behavioral measure. However, 25 of these surveys were missing a response to the definitional measure, which was necessary for the grouping of participants by stigma status. The total sample used to categorize participants for analysis was 1,063, which consisted 98% of students who engaged in the survey and 86% of all students in the district. The small amount of missing data allowed us to use listwise deletion of participants who provided inadequate data.

The final sample included 430 students (41%) in Grade 5, 303 students (29%) in Grade 7, and 330 students (31%) in Grade 9, of whom 51% were boys and 49% were girls. The ethnicity breakdown was as follows: 57% White/Caucasian, 18% Asian or Asian American, 10% Latino, 7% Black, 6% Multiethnic, and 2% other. The university institutional review board approved secondary analysis of these anonymous

data, which were originally gathered to inform school safety planning efforts.

### Measures

**Behavioral measure.** We used the CBVS (Felix et al., 2011) to ask students to report whether they had ever experienced any of eight types of peer victimization, done in a harmful, intentional manner: been teased or called names by another student, had rumors or gossip spread about them, been left out or ignored from a group, was physically hurt, been threatened, had things damaged or stolen, had sexual comments or gestures toward them, or been teased or had rumors spread about them online or through the Internet. Students rated the frequency of each of these events on a 5-point scale (1 = *not in the past month*, 2 = *once in the past month*, 3 = *2 or 3 times in the past month*, 4 = *about once a week*, 5 = *several times a week*). In addition, students rated the power disadvantage through a series of questions that asked respondents to “Please think of the MAIN person or leader who did these things to you in the past month. How does this person you are thinking of compare with you . . . How popular is this other student? How smart is this person in schoolwork? How physically strong is this student?” Students rated these power items on a 3-point scale (1 = *less than me*, 2 = *same as me*, 3 = *more than me*). Respondents were classified as bully victims if they reported that they experienced one or more types of victimization at least 2–3 times in the past month, it was done with harm and intent, *and* there was power imbalance. Respondents were classified as bully nonvictims if they reported one or more types of victimization but did not meet all of the criteria of bully victims. Respondents were classified as nonvictims if they reported experiencing none of the eight victimizations. Two-week test–retest reliability of bullied classification (percent agreement = 89.5,  $\kappa = .71$ ) and predictive validity (life satisfaction  $r = -.50$ ,  $-.37$ , and  $-.25$  and hope  $r = -.29$ ,  $-.29$ , and  $-.14$  for Grades 5–6, 7–8, and 9–12, respectively) of the CBVS have been documented (Felix et al., 2011). In the current sample, the eight victimization items had good internal reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Definitional measure.** Students completed a single item of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ), which has been used in nu-

merous studies to classify individual youth as bully victims (e.g., Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007). The BVQ provides a definition of bullying, which highlights intention, repetition, and power imbalance. The first question asks respondents if they had been bullied in the past 3 months with 5 response options: *I haven't been bullied at school in the past couple of months, it has only happened once or twice, 2 or 3 times a month, about once a week, several times a week*. Remaining items query the specific type of bullying respondents experienced. In the current study, the BVQ question was collapsed to a dichotomous variable that classified respondents as adopting the bully-victim label if they reported experiencing bully victimization at least 2–3 times in the past month (as suggested by Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The reliability and validity of the 10-item bullied scale of the BVQ has been studied and found to be adequate. For example, using Rasch analysis, Kyriakides, Kaloyirou, and Lindsay (2006) found good fit for the victim items measuring a single underlying construct. In terms of the individual item employed in this study, Solberg and Olweus found correlations of .79 between the dichotomized global scale and the bullied item.

**Psychosocial functioning.** The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) is a widely used brief behavioral questionnaire that measures children on 25 attributes, some positive and some negative, and is designed to provide an indication of psychosocial functioning but not a clinical determination. Through self-report, respondents can select *not true*, *somewhat true*, or *certainly true* for each attribute described. Psychometric analyses of the SDQ have found poor internal consistency of the original 5-factor model; alternative models have been proposed (e.g., Ruchkin, Jones, Vermeiren, & Schwab-Stone, 2008). In this study, we used the 3-factor version of the SDQ validated by Ruchkin et al. (2008) with urban and suburban youth in the northeastern United States because of the geographic similarity to participants in this study, superior reliability, and theoretical relevance of the resulting scales. The three subscales (with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  from the suburban participants of the Ruchkin study and participants of our study, respectively) are *emotional distress and withdrawal* (8 items;  $\alpha = .68, .73$ ), for example, "I get a lot of

headaches, stomach-aches or sickness" (a measure of internalizing problems); *behavioral reactivity and conduct problems* (7 items;  $\alpha = .76, .72$ ), for example, "I get very angry and often lose my temper" (a measure of externalizing problems); and *prosocial behavior and peer competence* (10 items;  $\alpha = .77, .76$ ), for example, "I am kind to younger children." All internal consistency coefficients for this study's sample exceeded the accepted benchmark of .70 (Leary, 2004), thus supporting the 3-factor model over the originally published 5-factor version.

## Analysis Procedures

In this study, students were categorized into 12 ( $2 \times 3 \times 2$ ) groups based on their pattern of responses to the BVQ item (yes or no self-identified as a bully victim), the CBVS indicator of repeated victimization (repeated, single, or no victimization), and the CBVS indicator of power disadvantage (yes or no perceived power disadvantage). Five of these groups were selected for comparative analysis to isolate the groups of interest in this study, that is, students who reported repeated victimization on the CBVS behavioral measure, with or without reporting a power disadvantage, and with or without self-identifying as a victim of bullying on the BVQ, as well as the no-victimization comparison group. Grouping students based on their pattern of responses to their experiences with the components of bullying (e.g., frequency, power disadvantage) is well established in the bullying literature. For example, Ybarra et al. (2014) grouped participants into seven groups based on bully status, perception of power differential, and frequency and repetition of bullying. After comparing means on measures of psychosocial functioning between the groups, the authors concluded that each distinct element of bullying should be measured and considered when an intervention is designed to support victims of bullying. What is novel in the current study is the consideration of self-identification (or labeling) as a grouping element, which may have additional significant clinical implications.

We conducted planned comparisons to focus only on the comparisons of interest to this study to increase the statistical power of each comparison. A series of ANOVAs compared the SDQ indices (i.e., emotional distress and with-

drawal, behavior reactivity and conduct problems, and prosocial behavior and peer competence) across different victimization groups to address the research questions. In terms of ANOVA assumptions of normality, the data were within acceptable ranges regarding skewness (1.15, 1.01,  $-0.98$ , respectively) and kurtosis (1.47, 1.03, 1.55, respectively; Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004). Visual inspection revealed that all scales were unimodal. Analyses were conducted using PASW Statistics 22 (SPSS, 2013).

We used effect size to interpret the results with Cohen's  $d$ , where .20 to .49 is small, .50 to .79 is medium, and .80 and greater is large (Cohen, 1988). Use of Cohen's  $d$  assumes equality of population variances through the use of pooled standard deviations. In a test of homogeneity of variances, the Levene statistic was significant for emotional distress and withdrawal, 4.05,  $p = .003$ , behavioral reactivity and conduct problems, 4.93,  $p = .001$ , and prosocial behavior and peer competence, 4.62,  $p = .001$  demonstrating that the variances are significantly different.

Results

Of the 1,063 participants, 440 (41%) reported no victimization, 306 (29%) reported repeated victimization of at least one type, and 317 (30%) reported a single victimization experience of one or more types via the behavioral approach. Of the participants who reported repeated victimization, most (77%) also endorsed a power disadvantage, but only 38% endorsed the bully-victim label. Of those who endorsed repeated victimization but no

power disadvantage, most also did not endorse the bully-victim label (74%). Thus, only a subset of students who experienced repeated victimization, even within the context of power disadvantage, characterized themselves as victims of bullying.

Numbers of participants in each of the 12 groups are shown in Table 1. Five of these groups (A–D and I,  $n = 744$ ) were of interest to this study. Groups A–D reported repeated victimization. Groups A and B reported no power disadvantage; Group A ( $n = 51$ ) did not self-identify on the BVQ as bully victims and Group B ( $n = 18$ ) did self-identify as bully victims. Groups C and D reported power disadvantage; Group C ( $n = 139$ ) did not self-identify on the BVQ as bully victims and Group D ( $n = 98$ ) did self-identify as bully victims. Group I ( $n = 438$ ) reported no experiences of victimization and did not self-identify as bully victims. Students in the remaining seven groups, who were not included in analyses, reported single instances of victimization (Groups E–H,  $n = 311$ ) or, in two anomalous cases, reported no victimization experiences, yet endorsed the bully-victim item (Group J,  $n = 2$ ). Respondents who reported no victimization were not able to respond to questions about a perceived power disadvantage in the web-based survey (Groups K and L,  $n = 0$ ).

Table 2 provides the mean scores and standard deviations of the three measures of psychosocial functioning for each group included in the analysis; Table 3 provides the results of the planned comparisons, as well as the ANOVA statistics for each of the five comparisons. The first set of analyses examined bully-victim identification and psychosocial functioning for victims versus nonvictims of bullying in

Table 1  
Number of Participants in Each Victimization Group

Frequency of victimization in past month <sup>a</sup>	Perceived power disadvantage: No <sup>a</sup>		Perceived power disadvantage: Yes <sup>a</sup>	
	Self-identified as bullied victim: No <sup>b</sup>	Self-identified as bullied victim: Yes <sup>b</sup>	Self-identified as bullied victim: No <sup>b</sup>	Self-identified as bullied victim: Yes <sup>b</sup>
Repeated	Group A $n = 51$	Group B $n = 18$	Group C $n = 139$	Group D $n = 98$
Single	Group E $n = 121$	Group F $n = 174$	Group G $n = 2$	Group H $n = 14$
None	Group I $n = 438$	Group J $n = 2$	Group K $n = 0$	Group L $n = 0$

Note. Groups A, B, C, D, and I were included in the planned comparisons shown in Table 3.

<sup>a</sup> Measured by the California Bully Victimization Scale (CBVS). <sup>b</sup> Measured by the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ).

Table 2

*Mean Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Emotional Distress, Behavioral Reactivity, and Prosocial Behavior Subscales by Victimization, Perceived Power Disadvantage, and Bullied Victim Self-Identity Status*

SDQ subscale Statistic	Nonvictims <i>n</i> = 438 (I)		Perceived power disadvantage: No				Perceived power disadvantage: Yes			
			Self- identified as bullied victim ( <i>n</i> = 51): No (A)		Self- identified as bullied victim ( <i>n</i> = 18): Yes (B)		Self- identified as bullied victim ( <i>n</i> = 139): No (C)		Self- identified as bullied victim ( <i>n</i> = 98): Yes (D)	
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Emotional distress & withdrawal	0.36	0.34	0.45	0.43	0.55	0.46	0.55	0.38	0.75	0.39
Behavior reactivity & conduct problems	0.36	0.34	0.57	0.39	0.82	0.49	0.54	0.39	0.62	0.42
Prosocial behavior & peer competence	1.57	0.31	1.44	0.41	1.42	0.41	1.47	0.33	1.44	0.31

*Note.* Groups A, B, C, D, and I are denoted in Table 1.

separate comparisons for those who reported power disadvantage and those who did not. Results demonstrated that for repeated victims *without* power disadvantage, there was a large effect of repeated victimization and endorsement of the bully-victim label ( $M = .82$ ) compared with no victimization ( $M = .36$ ) on behavior reactivity and conduct problems ( $d = 1.33$ ), but only a small effect for the other forms. For repeated victims *with* self-reported power disadvantage, there was a large effect of repeated victimization and endorsement of the bully-victim label versus no victimization on emotional distress and withdrawal ( $M = .75$  vs.  $.36$ ;  $d = 1.12$ ), a medium effect on behavior reactivity and conduct problems ( $M = .62$  vs.  $.36$ ;  $d = .73$ ), and a small effect for prosocial behavior and peer competence ( $M = 1.44$  vs.  $1.57$ ;  $d = -.42$ ).

The third analysis compared the additive effect of power disadvantage and bully-victim label. Results revealed that participants who perceived power disadvantage *and* endorsed the bully-victim label (Group D) had significantly more emotional distress and withdrawal ( $d = .55$ , a medium effect) than the other three groups. Group D was not significantly different than the other three victimization groups on the other two types of psychosocial functioning.

The last two analyses controlled for the presence of a power disadvantage by examining the adoption of the bully-victim label among the participants who reported no perceived power disadvantage and again within the participants

who did report perceived power disadvantage. Results demonstrate that for participants who reported no power disadvantage, there was a medium effect of *yes* (Group B  $M = .82$ ) versus *no* (Group A  $M = .57$ ) bully-victim label on behavior reactivity and conduct problems ( $d = .60$ ), and a small to no effect of the bully-victim label on the other two forms of psychosocial functioning. In contrast, for participants who reported a power disadvantage, there was a medium effect of *yes* (Group D  $M = .75$ ) versus *no* (Group C  $M = .55$ ) bully-victim label on emotional distress and withdrawal ( $d = .52$ ), but not the other forms.

## Discussion

Previous research shows that behavioral and definitional strategies for assessing bullying identify different groups of both victims and nonvictims (Green et al., 2013). Behavioral strategies present respondents with a series of questions that isolate the type, frequency, and presence of a power disadvantage for various self-reported victimization experiences to ascertain if the respondent has been a victim of bullying. Definitional approaches ask respondents to self-identify if they are bully victims based on criteria presented in a definition that details the various elements of bullying. We proposed that one reason these approaches identify different groups of victims is based on the psychological interpretation of victimization experi-



Table 3  
*Planned Comparisons for Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Factor Scores*

Subscale	Contrast	SE	t	df	p	d	95% [CI]
1. Group D vs. Group I: Effects of bullied victim identification and power disadvantage versus nonvictims							
Emotional distress & withdrawal	.39	.04	9.27	131.4	.000	<b>1.12</b>	[0.89, 1.34]
Behavior reactivity & conduct problems	.26	.05	5.76	127.1	.000	0.73	[0.51, 0.95]
Prosocial behavior & peer competence	-.13	.03	-3.90	144.1	.000	-0.42	[-0.64, -0.02]
2. Group B vs. Group I: Effects of bullied victim identification without power disadvantage compared with nonvictims							
Emotional distress & withdrawal	.19	.11	1.76	17.8	.096	0.20	[-0.27, 0.67]
Behavior reactivity & conduct problems	.46	.12	3.89	17.7	.001	<b>1.33</b>	[0.85, 1.81]
Prosocial behavior & peer competence	-.15	.13	-1.15	17.5	.264	-0.48	[-0.95, -0.01]
3. Group D vs. Groups A + B + C: Additive effect of bullied victim identification with power disadvantage							
Emotional distress & withdrawal	.23	.06	3.84	87.6	.000	0.55	[0.31, 0.80]
Behavior reactivity & conduct problems	-.03	.06	-0.52	82.4	.608	0.12	[-0.12, 0.36]
Prosocial behavior & peer competence	-.03	.06	-0.60	49.3	.551	-0.06	[-0.30, 0.18]
4. Group C vs. Group D: Effect of bullied victim identification when power disadvantage is present							
Emotional distress & withdrawal	.20	.05	3.93	206.2	.000	0.52	[0.26, 0.78]
Behavior reactivity & conduct problems	.09	.05	1.57	200.2	.117	0.20	[-0.06, 0.46]
Prosocial behavior & peer competence	-.03	.04	-0.74	218.1	.462	-0.09	[-0.35, 0.17]
5. Group A vs. Group B: Effect of bullied victim identification when power disadvantage is not present							
Emotional distress & withdrawal	.10	.12	0.85	28.4	.416	0.23	[-0.31, 0.77]
Behavior reactivity & conduct problems	.25	.13	1.91	25.1	.082	0.60	[0.05, 1.15]
Prosocial behavior & peer competence	-.02	.14	-0.12	24.2	.556	-0.19	[-0.05, 0.49]

*Note.* Comparisons did not assume equal variances. Medium effect sizes are underlined and large effect sizes are in bold. Mean values are for the SDQ average item response, range (0–3).

ences that might also be associated with how victimization affects psychosocial functioning. Specifically, we proposed that youths who accept the label of a bully victim via the definitional approach might have poorer levels of psychosocial functioning than youths who report experiencing bullying via criteria assessed by the behavioral approach but do not self-identify as bully victims. In addition, we hypothesized that self-reporting a power disadvantage or not in the victimization experience would also impact psychosocial outcomes.

To investigate our research questions, we measured the psychosocial functioning of students who reported experiencing repeated victimization with and without also reporting one or two psychological aspects of bullying: adopting the status of being a bully victim and perceived power disadvantage. The results, summarized in [Tables 2](#) and [3](#), reveal interactions between these two psychological experiences of bullying and their association with psychosocial functioning. Ultimately, for students who reported frequent victimization, acknowledging being bully victims was associated with lower psychosocial functioning than students who denied being bully victims, regardless of the perception of a power disadvantage. We found it interesting that, among students who did not report power disadvantage, the adoption of bully-victim status was associated with higher scores (a medium effect) on behavior reactivity and conduct problems. For students who did report a power disadvantage, the adoption of bully-victim status was associated with higher scores (a medium effect) on the emotional distress and withdrawal scale.

When we compared students who reported repeated victimization and adopted the bully-victim label with and without a power disadvantage to students who reported no victimization, the degree to which the behavioral and psychological experiences of bullying might impact psychosocial functioning was revealed. Students who reported repeated victimization and denied a power disadvantage, but accepted the bully-victim label reported more behavior reactivity and conduct problems (a large effect) than nonvictims. Students who reported repeated victimization and a power disadvantage and also accepted the bully-victim label re-

ported both more emotional distress and withdrawal (a large effect) and more behavior reactivity and conduct problems (a medium effect) than nonvictims.

It is interesting that our results reveal complexities regarding the experience of bullying; that is, when considering association with psychosocial functioning, the stigmatic self-perception of being bullied might be as important as the act of being bullied. These findings are consistent with studies that have found that the distinction between victims and bully victims is important for intervention, because psychosocial functioning is particularly poor among youth who are victimized by a person who is intentionally aggressive and also stronger, smarter, or more popular than the victim ([Felix et al., 2011](#)). This study provides further specificity to past research by revealing an interaction between the psychological interpretation of repeated victimization and psychosocial functioning. Specifically, adopting the bully-victim label is related to worse psychosocial functioning; for students who adopt the bully-victim label, the endorsement versus denial of a power difference is related to specific types of behavior challenges experienced by the youth. The relatively small group of youths with repeated victimization (5.9% in Group B of this study's sample) who accepted the bully-victim label and denied a power disadvantage tended to also report more behavior reactivity and conduct problems. One possible way to begin to understand this unusual and heretofore unstudied group can be found in research about students with hyperactive/aggressive behavior who have had hostile attribution bias ([Milich & Dodge, 1984](#)). These youths tended to falsely interpret the accidental or ambiguous behaviors of others as being purposefully negative or harmful (e.g., being hit by a basketball because of poor aim and assuming it was done on purpose). This bias might explain higher scores on behavior reactivity and conduct problems for the small subset of students who adopted the bully-victim label, despite not reporting the behavioral experience of bullying (i.e., the power disadvantage). Youths with repeated victimization who accepted the bully-victim label and did report a power disadvantage struggled more with emotional distress and withdrawal, which is consistent with studies that have found associations between victimization and depression,

loneliness, self-esteem, and anxiety (Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

Together, our findings indicate that a person's psychological processing of repeated victimization experiences related to a perceived power difference is associated with psychosocial functioning. This is supported by Ybarra et al. (2014) who identified the importance of both repetition and power dynamic in identifying the victims who are struggling the most with psychosocial functioning. Citing Visconti, Sechler, and Kochenderfer-Ladd (2013), Ybarra et al. (2014) concluded that the victim's appraisal of the power dynamic might be related to where the victim places blame for the experience. That is, victims who perceive a power disadvantage have an internal attribution or self-blame for the experience, whereas victims who do not perceive a power disadvantage have an external attribution for their victimization. Although past research has suggested that victims with internal attributions have poorer functioning than victims with external attributions, our findings suggest that these types of victims have two different but potentially equally problematic coping styles related to their attribution style. Based on the results of our study, internal attributions appear related to emotional distress and withdrawal whereas external attributions appear related to behavioral reactivity and conduct problems.

Finally, it was unexpected that prosocial behavior and peer competence were not significantly different based on acceptance or denial of the bully-victim label. It is possible that the established association between prosocial behavior and peer competence is due to peer perception of a student's victimization status rather than the victim's own psychological interpretation of events.

### Limitations

The limitations of this study relate to design and measurement concerns. First, the sample was from a single school district in the north-eastern United States. Thus, the results may not be generalizable to other regions of the United States. Second, all of the students in the sample completed the CBVS before the BVQ. Thus, there was a possible response order effect. Answering the items on the CBVS might have primed students for the BVQ, which subse-

quently might have influenced their responses. External data such as follow-up interviews would also be useful to validate group assignments. Third, we did not isolate the group of youths who might have been traditional bully victims. Although the CBVS does assess the extent to which respondents bully others, we did not include this aspect into the grouping of participants due to the complexity another dimension would bring to the study and because this group was not related to our specific research questions. Fourth, the sample size was small enough that it limited power to detect significant associations; although we used effect sizes to interpret findings, the confidence intervals were large for the comparisons involving Group B, which only had 18 participants. We used conservative interpretive standards for Cohen's *d* to avoid overstating the significance of our results. Finally, our results indicated that our measures did not have homogeneity of variances and were not perfectly normally distributed. These results are not surprising, given the nature of the constructs we were measuring, as achievement and psychosocial measures are commonly nonnormal (Micceri, 1989). Near violations of the assumptions of the statistical tests we used point to the need for further research to replicate our findings with innovative statistical techniques.

### Implications and Future Directions

The results of this investigation increase understanding of the complexity of bullying assessment and point to the unique and important contributions of both definitional and behavioral assessment approaches to more completely understanding the impact of bullying on the psychosocial functioning of youth. By combining information from these two types of measures, school psychologists might more appropriately understand the impact of bullying and therefore more effectively identify and design interventions for bully victims.

It is possible that different students will need different interventions based on their interpretation of victimization experiences. For example, it might be important to identify youth who adopt the bully-victim label as the group at highest-risk for poor psychosocial outcomes, because they have potentially de-

veloped schemas in which they self-identify as victims. Based on our results, students who accept the bully-victim label and perceive a power disadvantage are likely to need the most comprehensive psychosocial intervention. In contrast, students who do not perceive a power disadvantage in their victimization experiences might benefit from interventions that target externalizing behavior problems and hostile attribution bias. Future research might investigate the potential benefits of cognitive restructuring for both types of victims who assume the bully-victim identity. Students who endorse all of the definitional characteristics of bullying, but do not adopt the bully-victim label, might be most responsive to interventions that target the development of specific strategies to stop and respond to bullying behaviors, rather than interventions addressing their psychosocial functioning.

This study did not focus on students who bully others, and did not differentiate bully victims from other types of victims. Our findings indicate that students who accept the bully-victim status but deny a power disadvantage express externalizing behavior and perhaps a hostile attribution bias. Based on these characteristics, it is plausible that victims who are also bullies (i.e., bully-victims) fall within this group. Future research should investigate the association between stigma and outcomes for bully-victims versus pure victims; research indicates that bully-victims have the poorest psychosocial functioning of all groups (Yang & Salmivalli, 2013).

Ultimately, research should consider whether interventions for bullied youth that focus on specific psychosocial domains (e.g., emotional symptoms) are more efficacious than popular school-wide bullying interventions. Furthermore, it would be important to examine the direction of the association between psychosocial functioning and the various victimization subgroups through prospective longitudinal study. For example, hyperactivity might lead to victimization, which, in turn, might lead to emotional symptoms. Finally, this study's findings raise questions about whether youth who have experienced other forms of victimization (e.g., dating violence, child maltreatment) might more readily adopt a victimization label, which colors their experiences with peer aggression, increasing their vulnerability to negative psychosocial outcomes.

sion, increasing their vulnerability to negative psychosocial outcomes.

In conclusion, findings of this study further illustrate the importance of improving the assessment of bullying at school. Research that distinguishes more carefully among types of bullying and levels of severity would make it possible to better monitor bullying and provide targeted interventions in schools (Espelage & Astor, 2013). The adverse effects of bullying and victimization coupled with measurement weaknesses support the development of screening and multitasking procedures (Felix et al., 2011). Students who receive elevated bullying scores could be referred for follow-up interviews to further assess the extent to which they are involved in bullying. Also, information about the nature of the extent of the bullying can and should inform interventions (for more information, see Colvin, Tobin, Beard, Hagan, & Sprague, 1998).

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