

Giftedness and bullying: Protective factor or double-edged sword?

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INTRODUCTION

The literature on the psychosocial adjustment of gifted youth yields varied findings regarding the impact of high ability and intelligence on one's emotional and social well-being.

Some researchers have found that gifted and talented students face problematic social development due to isolating characteristics (Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Winner, 2000).

Furthermore, as many as 90% of gifted youth have reported that being gifted puts them at a social disadvantage (Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988). Cross, Coleman, and Stewart (1995) contend that high ability may be a social handicap to youths preventing them from becoming socially integrated.

On the other hand, Norman, Ramsey, Martray, and Roberts (1999) found that there were no differences in the self-concepts of gifted and non-gifted students, suggesting that gifted youth view themselves as positively as non-gifted peers do.

In addition, some findings suggest studies that gifted students are as well adjusted as non-gifted peers and may display fewer isolating characteristics (Grossberg & Cornell, 1988; Neihart, 1999; Merrell, Gill, & McFarland, 1996).

Past research does not clearly indicate whether gifted youth are psychosocially vulnerable due to certain isolating characteristics or if gifted youth may be able to adapt to their unique social stressors and avoid psychosocial difficulties.

Further research is warranted, however, in the study of how gifted youth are impacted by peer relationship difficulties, such as bullying.

Bullying is a ubiquitous peer problem, with 8.4% (Nansel, et al. 2001) to 20% (Limber & Small, 2000) of students reporting being victimized several times a week.

In addition, involvement in bullying has been associated with higher rates of anxiety, depressive symptoms and psychological distress (Kumpulainen, Räsänen, & Henttonen, 1999; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001; Foreiro, McLellan, Rissel, & Bauman, 1999).

Despite the pervasiveness and detrimental outcomes associated with bullying, no research has examined the impact bullying has on the psychosocial well-being of gifted youth, and in particular, whether the impact of bullying is different for gifted youth than for non-gifted youth.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of bullying on the psychosocial well-being of gifted youth in comparison with non-gifted youth. Specific research questions include: 1) Do gifted youth have comparable involvement in bullying as non-gifted youth? 2) Does gifted identification influence the likelihood of individuals to be bullies, victims, bully-victims, or bystanders? 3) Are gifted youth less affected by involvement in bullying than non-gifted peers as reflected by indicators of anxiety, hopelessness, depression, and aggression?

PARTICIPANTS

469 students (204 male, 265 female) participated in the study.

Participants were sixth-, seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students at three different Midwestern middle schools.

137 participants were identified as gifted.

Racial distribution of the students in the study is as follows: 89.3% Caucasian, 4.9% African-American, 2.3% Asian, 1.7% Latino(a), 1.1% Native American, and .4% Middle Eastern.

PROCEDURES

Data were collected in the Spring of 2002.

Active parental consent and youth assent were obtained for each student participant.

Student participants completed a series of self-report instruments which were administered during the school day and took approximately 1 hour to complete.

MEASURES

The Bully Survey-Student Version (BYS-S) Swearer, 2001.

The Bully Survey-Student Version is a four part, 31-question survey that queries students regarding their experiences with bullying, perceptions of bullying, and attitudes toward bullying. Bullying is defined as: "Anything from teasing, saying mean things, or leaving someone out of a group to physical attacks (hitting, pushing, kicking) where one person or a group of people picks on another person over a long time. Bullying refers to things that happen in school but can also include things that happen on the school grounds or going to and from school." In part A, students answer questions about when they were victims of bullying during the past year. Part B of the survey addresses questions about the participants' observations of bullying behavior among their peers during the past year (bystander role). Part C requests information from the participants about when they have bullied other students.

The Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (MASC) March, 1997.

This instrument is a self-report checklist assessing major dimensions of anxiety in children ages 8 to 19. The MASC consists of 39 items that when combined create a scale measuring Total Anxiety. Individuals are asked to rate the severity of each item based upon a four-point Likert scale. The MASC has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability for all main factors and subfactors, including a total score coefficient alpha of .90 (March, Parker, Sullivan, Stallings, & Connors, 1997). Additionally, the MASC has demonstrated satisfactory to excellent test-retest reliability (March, Sullivan, & Parker, 1999). In the present study, the internal consistency reliability using coefficient alpha was .92 for the total score.

The Hopelessness Scale for Children (HSC) Kazdin, French, Unis, Evedlt-Dawson, & Sherick, 1983

This scale was modeled after the Beck Hopelessness Scale for Adults (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974) and is written at about a second grade reading level. Hopelessness is defined as negative expectations that one holds towards oneself and towards the future (Kazdin et al., 1983). According to past research (Abramson et al., 1989; Beck et al., 1974; Kazdin et al., 1983), hopelessness is likely to proceed depression and suicidal ideation. The HSC is comprised of 17 true or false items that describe feelings of hopelessness or negative expectations for the future. A higher total score indicates greater feelings of hopelessness. In the present study, the internal consistency reliability using coefficient alpha was .89 for the total score.

The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) Buss & Warren, 2000

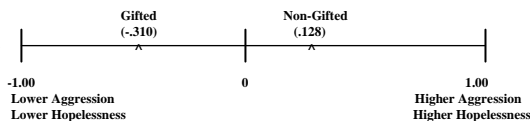
This instrument is an updated version of the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957), a standard measure for assessing anger and aggression in individuals ranging from 9-88 years old. A total aggression score (AQ Total) is also provided by summing the raw scores. Each item of the AQ describes a characteristic related to aggression. Participants are asked to read each item and rate how much each item is similar to themselves on a five point scale: 1 - "Not at all like me" to 5 = "Completely like me". In the present study, the internal consistency reliability using coefficient alpha was .92 for the total score.

Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) Kovacs, 1992, 2002

This instrument is the most commonly used self-report measure of depression for children 7 to 17 years of age. The CDI consists of 27 items designed to assess the overt symptoms of childhood depression. Participants are asked to rate the severity of each item on a three-point scale of 0 to 2 during the two weeks prior to testing. The CDI has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency and test-retest reliability as well as convergent validity (Kovacs, 1992). In the present study, the internal consistency reliability coefficient alpha was .87 for the total score.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Graphical depiction of the discriminant function results.



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Figure 2: Graphical depiction of the discriminant function results.

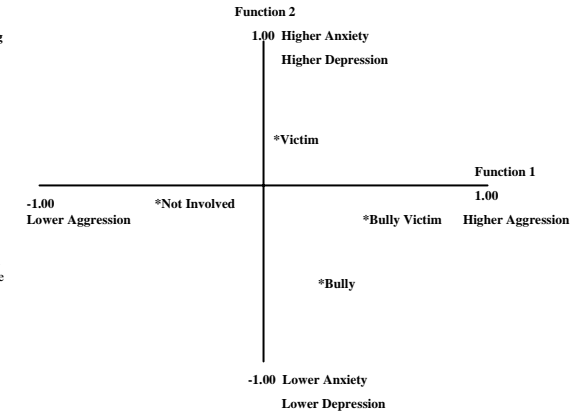
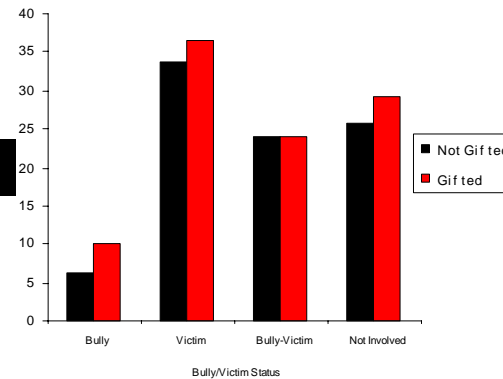


Figure 3: Gifted students Compared to Non-gifted Students on the Bully-victim Continuum



A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effect of bully-victim status and gifted identification on depression, aggression, anxiety, and hopelessness.

The Bully-victim main effect and Gifted identification main effect, and Bully-victim status x Gifted interaction effect were tested using the multivariate criterion of Wilk's lambda (Λ). The Bully-victim status main effect was significant, $\Lambda = .84, F(15, 1261.98) = 5.365, p < .001$, as well as the Gifted identification main effect, $\Lambda = .97, F(5, 457) = 3.041, p = .01$. The test associated with the Bully-victim status x Gifted interaction effect was non significant, $\Lambda = .97, F(15, 1261.98) = 1.078, p = .373$.

RESULTS, continued

A discriminant analysis was conducted to follow up the significant main effects. For the Gifted identification main effect, the overall Wilk's lambda was significant, $\Lambda = .96, \chi^2(5, N = 469) = 18.15, p = .003$. This test indicated that the predictors differentiated between gifted and non-gifted students.

Based on within-group correlations between the predictors and the discriminant function, as well as the standardized weights, aggression and hopelessness demonstrate the strongest relationship with the discriminant function, while depression and anxiety do not show a significant relationship.

Non-gifted students ($M = 13$) had higher means on aggression and hopelessness, while gifted students ($M = -.31$) had lower means.

For the Bully-victim status main effect, the overall Wilk's lambda was significant, $\Lambda = .81, \chi^2(15, N = 469) = 97.85, p < .001$, indicating that overall the predictors differentiated among the four types of participants in the bully-victim continuum (bully, victim, bully-victim, or not-involved). In addition, the residual Wilk's lambda was significant, $\Lambda = .96, \chi^2(8, N = 469) = 17.92, p = .02$. This test indicated that the predictors differentiated significantly among the four types of participants in the bully-victim continuum after partialling out the effects of the first discriminant function. Because these tests were significant, we chose to interpret both discriminant functions.

Within-group correlations between the predictors and the discriminant functions, as well as the standardized weights, indicated aggression showing the strongest relationship with the first discriminant function, while depression and anxiety show a weaker relationship. On the other hand, the depression and anxiety show the strongest relationship with the second discriminant function, while aggression shows a weaker relationship.

The means of the discriminant functions indicate that bully-victims ($M = .580$) had the highest mean on aggression (the first discriminant function), bullies ($M = .337$) had the next highest mean, then victims ($M = .048$), and not-involved students ($M = -.533$) with the lowest mean scores. On the other hand, victims ($M = .202$) had the highest mean on anxiety and depression (the second discriminant function), bully-victims ($M = -.028$) and not-involved students ($M = -.074$) had lower means, and bullies ($M = -.506$) had the lowest mean scores.

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether the distribution of gifted and non-gifted students along the bully-victim continuum differed. Gifted and non-gifted students were equally likely to be involved in the bully-victim continuum as bullies, victims and bully/victims, Pearson $\chi^2(3, N = 469) = 3.45, p = .33$, Cramer's $V = .09$.

DISCUSSION

The results of our data analysis of giftedness, bullying, and psychological stress suggest several patterns:

Gifted students were equally likely to be involved in the bully-victim continuum as their non-gifted peers.

As expected, the distribution of gifted students along the bully-victim continuum was similar to that of non-gifted students.

Gifted students generally experience less depression, aggression, and hopelessness. In these cases, giftedness may serve as a protective factor.

However, gifted bullies and gifted bully-victims experience similar degrees of depression, aggression, anxiety and hopelessness as their non-gifted peer bullies and bully-victims. This finding may suggest that when gifted students play particular roles in the bully-victim continuum, giftedness does not serve any protective function. Thus, giftedness may act as a double-edged sword for some participants in the bully-victim continuum, and as a protective factor for others.

LIMITATIONS

No findings suggest that gifted students may be more impaired than their non-gifted counterparts. However, the various subsets of the bully-victim continuum (e.g., bully, bully-victim) examined in this study may not have contained adequate sample sizes. Further investigation is warranted with larger numbers of gifted youth.