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Children's Bullying Experiences Expressed Through Drawings and Self-Reports

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ABSTRACT   Traditionally, studies assessing children's experiences of bullying and victimization have focused on the use of questionnaires and peer-nominations. The present study aimed to investigate this phenomenon by using two complementary assessment tools, namely self-reported questionnaires and children's drawings. The sample consisted of 448 boys and girls drawn from the 4th to 6th grade classrooms of ten primary schools in Central Greece. Children were asked to: (a) draw a scene of peer victimization taking place in their school and (b) complete self-reported questionnaires regarding bullying behaviour, victimization and participant roles in bully/victim incidences. Although the results showed that the relation between drawing and self-report measures is not a straightforward one, they do reveal some interesting associations primarily related to gender differences. In other words, it was found that boys outnumbered girls in both bullying behaviour and victimization. Regarding the employed forms of victimization, boys tended to depict themselves in more physical aggression scenes than girls, while girls tended to draw themselves in more verbal victimization scenes than boys.

KEY WORDS: bullying; children; drawing; victimization

Introduction

Bullying is a type of peer aggression commonly occurring in school settings; it appears to represent a universal phenomenon and can be observed in nearly all school classrooms (Berger, 2007). It is characterized by negative actions towards a peer, with the intention to hurt (Olweus, 1991, 1993). The actions of the bully are repeated over time and may include physical or verbal aggression (Boulton and Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1993) and relational harassment (Bjorkqvist et

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al., 1992; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Wolke et al., 2000), which harms others by means of social manipulation, social exclusion and malicious rumors. There is usually an imbalance of power between the bullies and their victims. Bullying takes place within relatively small and stable settings (like classes), which are characterized by the presence of the same people (e.g. children). Generally, children other than the bullies and their victims are also involved in the bullying process and may actually maintain the bullying by supporting the bully or failing to defend the victim.

Salmivalli et al. (1996) suggested that all the children in a particular class play a role in bullying and that only few of them may be considered to be uninvolved. Their study showed that schoolchildren may take on several roles in addition to 'Bully' and 'Victim': they may help the bully (assistants), provide the bully with positive feedback (reinforcers), stick up for the victim (defenders) or remain uninvolved and thus silently approve of the bullying (outsiders). Regarding gender differences in these participant roles, boys were found to be more actively involved in the bullying process as bullies, reinforcers, assistants or victims than girls who adopt more easily the role of defender (Andreou and Mettalidou, 2004; Boulton and Underwood, 1992; Lagerspetz et al., 1982; Menesini et al., 2003; O'Moore and Hillery, 1989; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton and Smith, 1999). They were also found to experience more physical and direct forms of victimization than girls who are more likely to be involved in relational bullying than boys (Andreou and Metallidou, 2004; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Eagly, 1987; Olweus, 1993).

Moreover, it was found that participants in bullying behavioural patterns are quite stable, while children who tend to adopt similar or complementary behaviour patterns in bullying situations form networks with each other (Salmivalli et al., 1997). Thus, in tackling bullying, one should try to affect children in all participant roles (Andreou et al., 2007; Salmivalli, 1999, 2001; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton and Smith, 1999) and try to make them see what they are doing, what consequences that might have and how changing their behaviour and expectations might help change the situation in the class. Valid assessment of 'bullies', 'victims' and 'bystanders' in bullying episodes constitutes a crucial element of this sort of intervention.

Most studies investigating bully/victim problems and participant roles in bullying situations rely on anonymous self-reports to identify bullies, victims, assistants, reinforcers, defenders and outsiders. Yet some bullies do not admit or even realize that their actions are harmful, partly because they interpret accidental affronts as hostile (Castro et al., 2002). They may over-report with pride their quickness to retaliate or under-report, if they realize others might blame them. The same

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is true for their followers, while both defenders' and outsiders' reports seem to be connected with their perceived social status within their group of peers (Stevens et al., 2000) Victims also misperceive or misreport, perhaps to justify, or deny their situation (Comodeca and Goosens, 2005; Salmivalli, 2001). Added to misreporting and misperceiving are the ambiguities of teasing and indirect bullying, especially where cross-sex bullying occurs (Benbenishty and Astor, 2005; Craig et al., 2001).

As an alternative to self-reports, some researchers ask classmates to identify bullies, victims and participant roles in bullying situations, often with specific questions (e.g. 'who is likely to call kids names?'). Students readily comply. However, analysis of this 'labor intensive peer nomination methodology' is complex (Junoven et al., 2003: 1232). An additional problem is that peers may reflect reputation and interpretation more than emotional reality (Berger, 2007). Data from teachers can also be misleading, since teachers identify some victims who do not identify themselves (Cullerton-Sen and Crick, 2005), but bullying often occurs outside the classroom, in bathrooms, lunchrooms and playgrounds. Therefore, the best approach seems to be a 'multi-method, multi-informant research strategy' (Pellegrini, 2001: 67).

Recently, Bosacki et al. (2006) argued that the above mentioned ways of assessing bullying employ a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis, which poses to the participants a limited number of questions and thus does not permit them to describe other aspects of bullying behaviour that might be important to them. Therefore, Bosacki et al. (2006) suggested that the use of children's pictorial representations might permit researchers to approach the bullying phenomenon from a different view point. They asked children aged 8- to 12-years-old to draw a bullying incident and then asked them to tell a brief story about their drawing and to answer some open-ended questions about their understanding of bullying. They argued that this methodological approach permitted them to investigate children's feelings, motives and thoughts about bullying and thus uncover some central moral issues regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

The present study
The aim of the present study was to investigate children's perceptions of bullying behaviour and victimization that take place in their schools by using two alternative assessment tools, namely self-reported questionnaires and children's drawings. Given that many children are reluctant to admit to bullying others or being bullied when directly asked, the use of children's drawings as a complementary assessment tool was considered as this would permit children to express indirectly through their drawings their perceptions of bullying phenomenon.

More specifically, the study attempts to investigate whether children's

performance on self-reported questionnaires assessing their role in bully/victim incidences and specific types of victimization in school is related to children's pictorial representations of bully/victim behaviour. In other words, we attempted to assess whether:

1 Drawings can be used as a valid means of assessing children's role in peer victimization.
2 Children depict in their drawings similar aspects of victimization to those expressed through self-reported questionnaires.
3 Similar to self-reports, gender differences in both forms of victimization and participant roles appear in children's drawings.

Methods

Participants
The participants of this study were 448 children drawn from the 4th to 6th grade classrooms of ten primary schools in an urban area of central Greece serving a broad cross-section of the community in terms of socioeconomic background. The sample consisted of 206 girls and 242 boys, ranging in age from 9- to 12-years-old (mean = 10.21, SD = 0.86).

Questionnaires
Role in bullying. All children completed the 'Peer-victimization Scale' and the 'Bullying Behaviour Scale' (Austin and Joseph, 1996). The 'Peer-victimization Scale' consists of six forced items, three of which refer to being the victim of negative physical actions (i.e. hit and pushed, picked on, bullied) and three of which refer to being the victim of negative verbal actions (i.e. teased, horrible names, laughed at). For each item, participants were presented with descriptions of two kinds of children, ones with high victim behaviour and ones with low victim behaviour; participants indicated which of the two kinds of children they resembled more and then indicated whether this choice was *really true* or *sort of true* for them. Responses were scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with higher scores reflecting greater victimisation.

The item pool of the 'Bullying Behaviour Scale' was based on the 'Peer-victimization Scale' and involved changing the tense of the item from passive to active. Therefore, the 'Bullying Behaviour Scale' consists of six forced items, three of which refer to being the perpetrator of negative physical actions (i.e. hit and pushed, picked on, bullied) and three of which refer to being the perpetrator of negative verbal actions (i.e. teased, horrible names, laughed at). For each item, participants were presented with descriptions of two kinds of children, ones with high bullying behaviour and ones with low bullying behaviour; participants indicated which of the two kinds of children they resembled more and

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then indicated whether this choice was *really true* or *sort of true* for them. Responses were scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with higher scores reflecting greater bully behaviour.

As both the 'Bullying Behaviour Scale' and the 'Peer-victimization Scale' employ the same forced choice format as the 'Self-Perception Profile for Children' (SPPC, Harter, 1985), both were scored according to the instructions provided by Harter (1985) for scoring the SPPC sub-scales. Thus, the maximum possible score for each scale was 24 and the minimum 6.

In addition, they completed a shortened version of the 'Participant Role Scale' (Salmivalli et al., 1996) which was presented as a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 16 behaviour descriptions (see Andreou and Metallidou, 2004; Sutton et al., 1999) in each of the following roles: (a) assistant (active but more follower than leader-like – 5 items); (b) reinforcer (inciting the bully, providing an audience, etc. – 2 items); (c) defender (sticking up for or consoling the victim – 5 items) and (d) outsider (staying away, doing nothing in bullying situations – 4 items). Items were structured and scored similarly to those on the 'Bullying Behaviour Scale' and the 'Peer-victimization Scale'. Responses were again scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with higher scores reflecting greater assistant, reinforcer, defender and outsider behaviour respectively. The maximum possible score that children could obtain on the assistant reinforcer, defender and outsider scales are 20, 8, 20 and 16 and the minimum 5, 2, 5 and 4 respectively.

Reliability of the six roles in bullying measures was satisfactory (Cronbach's alphas: bully $\alpha = 0.82$; victim $\alpha = 0.85$; assistant $\alpha = 0.71$; reinforcer $\alpha = 0.70$; defender $\alpha = 0.73$ and outsider $\alpha = 0.69$).

Forms of peer-victimization. The 'Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale' (Mynard and Joseph, 2000) was used to assess specific types of victimization in school. This scale consists of four four-item sub-scales assessing Physical Victimization (e.g. punching, kicking, etc.), Verbal Victimization (calling names, sworing, etc.), Social Manipulation (e.g. getting someone into trouble with their friends, making other people not talk to someone) and Attacks on Property (stealing, breaking personal things, etc.). All children indicated how often (0 = 'Not at all', 1 = 'Once', 2 = 'More than Once') during the school year they had experienced these victimizing experiences. Internal reliability of each subscale was found to be satisfactory (Cronbach's Alphas ranged from 0.67–0.85).

Drawing task

The drawing task was administered as a classroom assignment. Children were seated in separate tables to prevent copying. Testing was completed in one session, lasting approximately 30 minutes. Students

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were given a plain white A4 paper, a pencil and an eraser. They were instructed to write their name, grade and sex on the top of the paper. The examiner gave them the following instructions: 'Draw a scene of peer victimization taking place in your school. In case that you participate in the scene, please, mark yourself with an arrow'

Coding of drawings
The drawings produced were coded according to two different dimensions, namely (a) depiction of self and (b) depiction of different aspects of bullying behaviour. Firstly, 'self-depiction' was referred to the particular role the child assigned to her/himself in the drawing scene. In other words, it was examined whether the child represented her/himself as victim, bully, assistant, reinforcer, defender or outsider. Secondly, depiction of different aspects of bullying behaviour was referred to the types of victimization that were represented in the drawn scene. More precisely, it was examined whether the child depicted in his/her drawing physical aggression, verbal victimization, social manipulation, attacks on property or a combination of different bullying behaviours.

Eighty drawings were independently analysed by two judges and inter-rater agreement was found to be satisfactory (94 percent for self-depiction and 91 percent for the depiction of aspects of bullying behaviour).

Representative drawings that demonstrate the way coding was performed on the basis of self-depiction and depiction of different aspects of bullying behaviour are presented in Figures 1 and 2 respectively.

Results
Two hundred and six out of 448 children depicted themselves in the victimization scene, while 424 children portrayed concrete forms of victimization (physical, verbal or both). No drawings depicting social manipulation or attacks on property were found.

The analysis of drawings revealed that children depicted themselves in the roles of victim, bully, defender and outsider but not in assistant or reinforcer role. It must be noted that the roles of assistant and reinforcer were observed in children's drawings, but assigned to other children participating in the scene and not to the drawing child. In order to explore whether drawings can assess children's role in peer victimization, we examined whether there was a relationship between the depicted self and children's scores on these four Participant Role Scales.

Therefore, we performed a one-way analysis of variance with depicted self as independent variable and children's scores on the four scales as dependent variables.

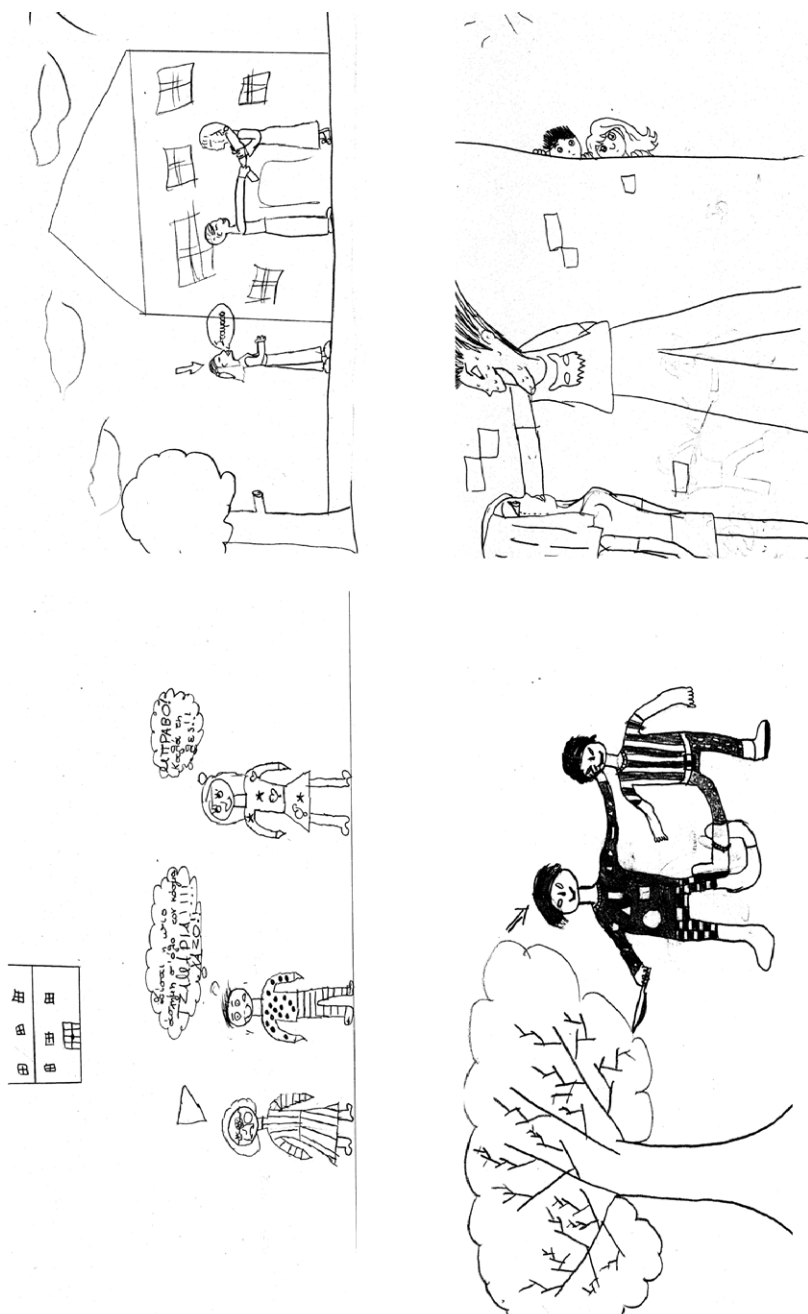The analysis showed that the scores of children who depicted their

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Figure 1 *Representative drawings of self-depiction*

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Figure 2 *Representative drawings of different forms of bullying behaviour*

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Table 1 *Means and SD of children's scores on Participant Role Scales by type of depicted self*

| | Self-Depiction | | | |
	Victim	Bully	Defender	Outsider
Victim Scale	10.92 (3.80)	13.11 (4.32)	10.06 (3.47	11.77 (4.07)
Bully Scale	10.37 (3.63)	11.17 (4.23)	9.73 (3.18)	11.44 (4.18)
Defender Scale	16.07 (3.78)	15.47 (4.70)	16.42 (2.94)	16.42 (2.94)
Outsider Scale	8.92 (3.06)	8.76 (2.22)	8.74 (2.38)	8.72 (2.63)

Table 2 *Frequencies of depicted self in participant roles grouped by gender*

Self depiction	Girls	Boys
Victim	10	17
Bully	1	16
Defender	59	42
Outsider	24	37

selves as participants in the scene varied significantly only in the Victim Scale [$F(3, 151) = 3.321$, $p = 0.021$].

Application of the *Scheffe post hoc* comparison test showed that the differences among groups were significant only in one case, that between depicted bullies and defenders on the Victim scale (see Table 1).

Regarding the depicted types of victimization and children's scores in the relevant scales no significant association has been found.

In a next step, we attempted to examine whether similar sex differences appear between the drawing task and the other measures used to assess peer victimization. Frequencies of depicted self in each role by children's gender are presented in Table 2. Statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls in all participant roles depicted [χ^2 ($v = 206$) $= 24.14$, $p = 0.000$]. The only case that girls outnumbered boys was that of defender participant role. In all other cases boys systematically depicted themselves more often than girls as a victim, bully or outsider.

Table 3 presents the means and Standard Deviations (SD) for all participant roles, grouped by gender. No significant difference was found between boys and girls on the outsider role scale, although boys scored higher than girls. Boys scored significantly higher than girls on both

Table 3 *Means and SD of children's scores on Participant Role Scales grouped by gender*

	Girls	Boys
Victim Scale	10.14 (3.77)	11.59 (3.70)
Bully Scale	9.57 (3.56)	11.53 (3.71)
Defender Scale	16.38 (3.31)	15.64 (3.70)
Outsider Scale	8.65 (2.59)	8.94 (2.69)

'Peer-victimization' and 'Bullying Behaviour' scales [$F(1, 447) = 16.825$, $p = 0.000$ and $F(1,436) = 31.664$, $p = 0.000$ respectively]. The only case that girls' scores were higher than boys' was that of the defender participant role scale [$F(1,443) = 4.79, p = 0.029$].

As regards the different depicted types of victimization, a chi square test revealed significant sex differences in children's drawings [$\chi^2 (v = 422) = 12,56, p = 0.006$]. Girls tended to draw themselves in more verbal victimization scenes than boys (55 versus 28), while boys tended to draw themselves in more physical aggression (163 versus 131) and mixed (both physical and verbal) scenes (35 versus 10). Boys' scores were significantly higher than girls' on both 'Physical victimization' (mean = 2.78, SD = 2.08 and mean = 2.23, SD = 1.92 respectively, $F(1,447) = 8.443$, $p = 0.004$) and 'Verbal victimization' scales (mean = 3.48, SD = 2.30 and mean = 2.99, SD = 2.42 respectively, $F(1,447) = 4.927, p = 0.027$).

Discussion

By asking children to draw a specific scene (i.e. a bully/victim incident) we assumed that the resulting drawings would permit us to uncover certain issues regarding the bullying phenomenon. Although our results do not support the assumption that drawing is fully associated with established self-report measures of bully/victim behaviours, they do reveal some interesting associations primarily related to gender differences.

More specifically, boys outnumbered girls in both bullying behaviour and victimization, while girls were more heavily represented in the defender group, regardless of the assessment used (depiction or self-reported measures). These results are consonant with other findings – obtained by self-reports or peer nominations – which suggest that boys are more likely to be involved in bullying as bullies or victims,

whereas girls are more likely to be defenders of the victim (Andreou and Mettalidou, 2004; Boulton and Underwood, 1992; Menesini et al., 2003; O'Moore and Hillery, 1989; Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Moreover, significant differences were found in terms of gender in forms of victimization. Boys tended to depict themselves in more physical aggression and mixed (both physical and verbal) scenes than girls, while their scores were higher on both 'physical victimization' and 'verbal victimization' scales. Girls, on the other hand, tended to draw themselves in more verbal victimization scenes, while they did not differ from boys in self-reported verbal victimization. Feinburg (1977) who analysed both the subject matter and the spatial characteristics in drawing scenes of fighting and helping, reported pronounced differences between sexes. She found that in the case of fighting boys and girls showed different modes of conceptualization. Boys depicted fighting by employing images of power and competence, teams, armies and other structured forms involving rules and order. On the other hand, girls represented fighting as an interpersonal conflict between two known persons (such as friends or relatives) in direct confrontation. Other findings – obtained by self-reported measures – suggest that direct forms of victimization are more likely to be experienced by boys than girls (Andreou and Metallidou, 2004; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Eagly, 1987; Olweus, 1993). As Salmivalli et al. (1996) argue, this finding, which is partly supported by our results, can be interpreted by the fact that for boys, physically aggressive ways of being together are more common and more approved. To be accepted in their peer group, boys are expected to join, at least to some extent, in rough-and-tumble play, mutual 'testing' and bullying behaviour. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to behave in more prosocial and care-taking ways because it is a part of the female social role (Eagly, 1987).

Results regarding differences among depicted participant roles showed that depicted defenders scored significantly lower than depicted bullies on the 'Peer Victimization Scale'. Taking into account that 'defenders' have confidence in their ability to assert themselves (Andreou and Metallidou, 2004), are low on both proactive and reactive aggression (Comodeca et al., 2002) and usually liked by their classmates (Salmivalli et al., 1996), it is surprising that they are less likely to experience victimization by peers. More research into bullying as a group process is needed, investigating in more detail, through multi-informant research strategies, how several factors influence participation in bullying.

Surprisingly, in our study neither drawings depicting social manipulation or attacks on property were found, nor were the personal roles of assistant or reinforcer depicted. These findings suggest that there might be a fundamental flaw in the research process in that the children's

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drawings are likely to be influenced more by stereotypes than by reality, as well as by their drawing competence.

Despite the above, a possible benefit of using children's drawings as an additional methodological tool to assess bullying experiences is that it can give us useful information for preschool-aged children (Bosacki et al., 2006), since drawing is a popular activity in kindergarten. As Gillies-Rezo and Bosacki (2003) point out, it is considered important to investigate the onset of bullying behaviour during preschool years, in an attempt to stop the phenomenon before it starts.

Future research might need to explore how peer victimization is depicted in an experimental setting, where the role of cognitive and motor skills that intervene in the drawing process will be well controlled (Burkitt et al., 2003; Thomas and Jolley, 1998). In other words, future studies need to focus on particular drawing properties such as size and spatial arrangements in order to investigate systematically children's perceptions about the drawing theme.

A potential shortcoming of the present study is that we have not used drawings of children as a starting point for their narrative description of bullying (Bosacki et al., 2006). It is possible that, if we had asked children to talk about the drawn scene of peer victimization, we could have used their comments in order to gain a better insight into their perceptions. In this context, recent research has shown that drawings can facilitate children to recall past events (Butler et al., 1995). It has been found that asking children to draw a picture about a personal experience, significantly increases the amount of information verbally recalled about that experience. This promising finding suggests that children who have been victimized can be helped to give a more reliable account if they are asked to draw as well as to tell about their own experience (Cox, 2005).

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