

PEER REVIEW HISTORY

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ARTICLE DETAILS

TITLE (PROVISIONAL)	A protocol for the design of an instrument to measure preadolescent children's self-report of covert aggression and bullying.
AUTHORS	Nelson, Helen; Kendall, Garth; Burns, Sharyn; Schonert-Reichl, Kimberly

VERSION 1 - REVIEW

REVIEWER	Raúl Navarro University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain
REVIEW RETURNED	02-Aug-2015

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>Thank you for the opportunity to read this informative manuscript concerning covert forms of bullying. However, the weakness of the study concerns that they only show a research plan to develop a scale. Although the article has send as a protocol type, I cannot see how it contribute you the advance of bullying research. Prior to publication in a journal, I would recommend that the authors include the development of the instruments, to this respect, they should show data from the focus groups, and show the psychometric properties of the scale in relation with other measures. I really hope that the authors will feel able to complete the article showing some results and discuss about these results in order to make a more valuable contribution to knowledge. For that reason I cannot accept this article for publication.</p> <p>There are some other concerns that would need to be addressed before this contribution can be realized.</p> <p>1) The introduction, methods need further clarification. For example, the incremental contribution the study makes to the extant literature needs clarification. For example, authors should explain better what different they establish among relational, indirect, social and covert aggression. As they explained, other authors have referred to relational or indirect aggression, features that already have a covert nature. They should also have to include some references about social aggression and social bullying that has overt and covert forms.</p> <p>2) Theoretically, the paper did not set up a convincing delineation of the incremental contribution the study makes to the extant empirical literature. I am not saying there isn't one there (indeed I think there may be), but just that it needs to be more clearly articulated in the context of an empirical report (not for a protocol). The introduction should end with clearly articulated expectations (hypotheses) that advance current knowledge and that drive the data analysis.</p>
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	<p>3) The review is extensive and comprehensive, however it is also somewhat repetitive and lengthy. One suggestion would be to combine the information on aggressive behavior and bullying.</p> <p>4) Toward the end of the review the authors discuss aims, and show the research design, however I think this sections could be reduced. Some of the information showed is repetitive. Indeed, I found the method explanation very difficult to follow and therefore I could not fully realize the contribution the manuscript was making.</p> <p>5) I hope authors will add the similarities and differences between your study and other existing studies.</p> <p>6) Authors should indicate how validity is going to be check. For example, what other measures are going to be used to test convergent and discriminant validity. But not only explain how, they should show the data.</p> <p>7) Authors states that there are not previous measures assessing imbalance of power, repetition or intention to harm. They should look at reviews of bullying measures as that made by Vivolo-Kantor et al.</p>
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REVIEWER	Henning Tiemeier Erasmus Medical Center, Rotterdam, Netherlands
REVIEW RETURNED	01-Sep-2015

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>The authors of this report have two goals, firstly, they review the literature on bullying and aggression, in particular, covert bullying (against the background of plans to develop a new assessment tool). Secondly, they describe a specific research plan and the setting for the development of such a tool.</p> <p>About the latter aim and the second part of the manuscript I would like to be brief. This reads like a project proposal. It is an exciting project but it is not of general interest to the reader of BMJ Open. I think it is important to publish papers on the development of assessment tools but only after this task has been achieved. Experiences of assessment tool development are of interest to a select readership but only if this includes data on reliability, validity, true life experiences, inclusion problems, response rates etc. Without these experiences the reader cannot learn from the endeavor.</p> <p>The first part of the manuscript tackles a very, very important aspect of bullying: the fact that a large part of bullying is covert. Hover, the definition of covert used by the authors is not unproblematic, it is defined and operationalized as "unnoticed by adults". I would like to challenge this view because it mixes unnoticed, not observed and deliberately or intentionally covert, performed without teachers or adults able to notice (easily). Using the current definition, any misclassification or information bias resulting from the use of parent or teacher report affects the prevalence of covert bullying. This is problematic, also given the context of aggression, covert and overt aggression should be defined/measured independent of the observer.</p> <p>I have two related points of critique. In general the issue of multi-</p>
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	<p>informant assessment is underdeveloped. What is relation, the added value of multiple informants, teachers, parents and peers? The consistency is low, even across adult reporters.</p> <p>Also, the authors are very optimistic about the validity of self reported bullying involvement, in particular covert bullying self report. In my experience children and adolescence under-report their bullying involvement and may over-report victimization. There is very good Finnish and Dutch literature about in-degree and out-degree reporting, the importance of perspective and validity of reports should be mentioned, this does not only pertain to bullying but also to friendships.</p> <p>Finally, the background of aggression assessment is somewhat limited and I miss some more recent concepts such as callous unemotional traits, irritability, headstrong and hurtfulness, all have been shown to be important subtypes and latent classes of aggression and are possibly relevant in this respect.</p> <p>I complement the author for addressing this very relevant and truly under-recognized aspect of bullying, the unnoticed by adults or covert bullying. This is indeed particularly important in the relational sphere, which parent knows whether his daughter or son (at least equally many daughters!) is a relational bully, that is manipulates other class mates and friendships, excludes selectively.....</p> <p>To end this review, I would like to suggest a more systematic review of this complicated topic but also add that I honestly wish that the project succeeds and hope the authors add assessments of romantic friendships within the population to their study.</p>
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VERSION 1 – AUTHOR RESPONSE

Reviewer: 1

Reviewer Name Raúl Navarro

Institution and Country University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

1) The incremental contribution the study makes to the extant literature needs clarification. For example, authors should explain better what different they establish among relational, indirect, social and covert aggression. As they explained, other authors have referred to relational or indirect aggression, features that already have a covert nature. They should also have to include some references about social aggression and social bullying that has overt and covert forms.

Thank you, the introduction has been rewritten to address this comment. Covert aggression is defined as "aggression that is deliberately or intentionally hidden from adults" (page 5, line 58). Please see in particular page 6, lines 5-52 (Aggression), and page 10, beginning at line 9 (Covert behaviour).

2) Show the incremental contribution the study makes to the extant empirical literature. The introduction should end with clearly articulated expectations (hypotheses) that advance current knowledge and that drive the data analysis.

Statement of Hypotheses

"We hypothesise that: (a) focus group analyses will support the premise that children perceive an increase of hurt when adults are either unaware of, or insensitive to, children's reports of bullying; and (b) exploratory factor analyses will provide preliminary support for the seven factors of the proposed model, including covert aggression defined as aggression that is deliberately or intentionally hidden from adults."

3) The review is extensive and comprehensive, however it is also somewhat repetitive and lengthy. One suggestion would be to combine the information on aggressive behavior and bullying.

Thank you, in line with this comment and the call by Reviewer 2 for a review of this topic, the literature review has been rewritten.

4) Toward the end of the review the authors discuss aims, and show the research design, however I think this sections could be reduced. Some of the information showed is repetitive. Indeed, I found the method explanation very difficult to follow and therefore I could not fully realize the contribution the manuscript was making.

Because the editor is happy to publish a protocol, this section has been maintained, but in line with this comment it has been slightly reduced.

5) I hope authors will add the similarities and differences between your study and other existing studies.

Thank you, please see the rewrite of the literature review.

6) Authors should indicate how validity is going to be check. For example, what other measures are going to be used to test convergent and discriminant validity. But not only explain how, they should show the data.

Convergent and discriminant validity will be measured by factor analysis as described on page 16, lines 47-59.

7) Authors states that there are not previous measures assessing imbalance of power, repetition or intention to harm. They should look at reviews of bullying measures as that made by Vivolo-Kantor et al.

We are unaware of any self-report measure that measures imbalance of power, repetition or intention to harm, and a measure of covert behaviour, defined as deliberately or intentionally hidden from adults. The wording of this sentence has been changed to clarify the intended meaning: "To the authors' knowledge, there are no self-report measures of aggression and bullying that include each of the defined elements of: intent to harm, feeling of hurt, physical and relational aggression, repetition, power imbalance, and covert behaviour that is deliberately or intentionally hidden from adults." (Page 11, lines 45-51).

Reviewer: 2

Reviewer Name Henning Tiemeier

Institution and Country Erasmus Medical Center, Rotterdam, Netherlands

1) The first part of the manuscript tackles a very, very important aspect of bullying: the fact that a large part of bullying is covert. However, the definition of covert used by the authors is not unproblematic, it is defined and operationalized as "unnoticed by adults". I would like to challenge this view because it mixes unnoticed, not observed and deliberately or intentionally covert, performed without teachers or adults able to notice (easily). Using the current definition, any misclassification or information bias resulting from the use of parent or teacher report affects the prevalence of covert bullying.

This is problematic, also given the context of aggression, covert and overt aggression should be defined/measured independent of the observer.

Thank you for differentiating “unnoticed by adults” from deliberately or intentionally covert behaviour. Covert has now been defined for this research as "deliberately or intentionally hidden from adults" (p. 3, line 25-27; p.5, line 11; & p.11). This is also further addressed in the last paragraph of page 10. Our research will explore covert behaviour as a potential influence within power imbalance.

2) In general the issue of multi-informant assessment is underdeveloped. What is relation, the added value of multiple informants, teachers, parents and peers? The consistency is low, even across adult reporters.

The following has been added (p. 11, line 31-41): "Despite widespread acknowledgement that bullying research will ideally include measurement from multiple informants to reduce bias, child self-report is recommended as a starting point[48,61]. Low agreement has been found among multiple reporters and this is to be expected, for example, with covert bullying that is deliberately hidden from teachers, and with socially desirable responding by perpetrators. Self-report allows victims of covert bullying to report on their own perceived experience[11]. For this reason, this research will begin with the development of a self-report measure as a baseline, with the intention of the later inclusion of peer, teacher, and parent report instruments[34]."

3) Also, the authors are very optimistic about the validity of self reported bullying involvement, in particular covert bullying self report. In my experience children and adolescence under-report their bullying involvement and may over-report victimization. There is very good Finnish and Dutch literature about in-degree and out-degree reporting, the importance of perspective and validity of reports should be mentioned, this does not only pertain to bullying but also to friendships.

Thank you for referring to the literature on in-degree and out-degree reporting. In Western Australia it is very difficult to attain ethics approval for peer-nomination. For this reason, and because Olweus (2013) recommends that the self-report of power imbalance by the victim is key to differentiating aggressive behaviour from bullying, we have decided to begin by developing a self-report (see pages 8-11). This is not intended as an end-point, as acknowledged (see p.11, lines 25-41).

4) Finally, the background of aggression assessment is somewhat limited and I miss some more recent concepts such as callous unemotional traits, irritability, headstrong and hurtfulness, all have been shown to be important sub-types and latent classes of aggression and are possibly relevant in this respect.

Thank you for this comment. The literature review has been expanded to include callous unemotional traits (page 7, line 45 - page 8, line 11). Irritability, headstrong and hurtfulness were considered beyond the scope of this review within the space available to address a complicated topic.

5) To end this review, I would like to suggest a more systematic review of this complicated topic but also add that I honestly wish that the project succeeds and hope the authors add assessments of romantic friendships within the population to their study.

Thank you. The literature review has been expanded.