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Bullying Experiences of Individuals with Visual Impairment: The Mitigating Role of Sport Participation

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In bullying research, status plays a key role in who is the instigator and who is the recipient of bullying. Athletes are often considered a high status individual and have been accused of engaging in bullying behaviors. Individuals with disabilities are seen as possessing lower status and are often the victims of bullying. What is unclear is if athletes who have a disability are instigators of bullying or are victims themselves. This study explored implications of status as it relates to bullying experiences by athletes and non-athletes with visual impairments. Specific attention was paid to uncovering similarities and differences between the two groups. Results indicate that individuals with visual impairments are both the victim and instigator of bullying activities. The hypothesis of status as a factor in bullying was supported within both populations.

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In 2007, the National Institute of Health published a study indicating that one in three middle school and high school students have been bullied in the past academic year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Health [NIH], 2010). Other findings indicate that whether an individual will be a bully or victim is highly dependent on their status (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Most research on bullying demonstrates that individuals with high status within peer groups are often the aggressors and bullies in school settings (e.g. Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007; Pokhrel, Sussman, Black & Sun, 2010; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003). Certain extracurricular activities, such as high profile sports, are linked to achievement of high status; participation in some activities, such as band or drama, have been linked to lower-status individuals (Peguero, 2008). Other attributes that have been found to be linked with lower status are persons of low socio-economic status, poor academic performance, individuals who are deemed unattractive, and those with disabilities (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Samivalli, 2009; Farmer, Irvin, Leung, Hall, Hutchins, & McDonough, 2010; Wilcox, Tillyer, & Fisher, 2009).

What remains unknown is what types of bullying behaviors occur in a population of athletes who are also disabled. That is, are these individuals bullied as part of the lower-status hierarchy group or are they classified as part of the athlete population (the higher status group) which engages in the bullying of others? The present research is concerned with exploring bullying experiences for individuals with visual impairments. We sought to uncover how athletes and non-athletes with visual impairments report bullying behaviors in relation to social hierarchies and status.

Bullying and Status in School Settings

Since 1998, several school shootings and highly publicized suicides in the United States have thrust bullying to the forefront of both popular discussion and academic research. The invention of cyber-bullying and a better understanding of the long-term consequences of victims have many researchers beginning to explore this topic in greater depth (NIH, 2010). Debunking stereotypes about the nature and context of bullying is an important first step. While traditional ideas of bullying have been limited to physical assaults, non-physical acts are now a common tactic for bullies and are included in most bullying definitions (Sweeting & West, 2001). Broadly defined as repeated exposure to negative actions on the part of one or more others over a period of time, we can begin to see how acts of a physical nature are only one part of the equation (Olweus, 1997). Acts of intentional isolation or being ostracized, in addition to hitting or kicking, are all negative actions that can be examples of bullying (Taub & Greer, 2000; Sweeting & West, 2001). With the accessibility of the internet and many social networking sites, these negative actions can now be sent without having physical proximity between victims and bullies (Jose, Kljakovic, Scheib, & Notter, 2012).

Traditionally, two roles within bullying have been studied, the bully and the victim (e.g. Farmer, Petrin, Brooks, Hamm, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2012; Swearer, Wang, Maag, Sibecker, & Frerichs, 2012). Beginning in the early 1990's research began to uncover two distinct types of victims, the passive or non-aggressive victim and the aggressive victim (Sekol & Farrington, 2010). The aggressive victim, sometimes called a provocative victim or reactive bully, is now commonly referred to as a bully-victim (Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Sekol & Farrington, 2010). While the non-aggressive victim will ignore bullying behaviors or passively accept the attacks from peers, the bully-victim will both bully others and be bullied themselves (Felipe, de Ossorno Garcia, Babarro, & Arias, 2011; Pellegrini, 1998). Bully-victims are described as both starting fights and being picked on, and, as the reactive and aggressive bully labels indicate, display more of a hostile style of social interaction (Felipe et al., 2011; Pellegrini, 1998).

Additional research has explored characteristics of bully-victims that distinguish them from bullies and passive victims. Bully-victims are likely to emerge from a multiple risk profile, where individuals have academic, social, developmental, and other difficulties rather than a singular area of distress (Farmer et al., 2012). Research has shown that while bullies use aggression as an instrument, bully-victims use aggression in a reactionary manner (Pellegrini, 1998; Pelligrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). Bully-victims often use tactics to annoy and tease others to create tension but also fight back when insulted or attacked (Felipe et al., 2011; Pellegrini, 1998). Finally, bully-victims have been shown to be more socially isolated and to use physical aggression more frequently than bullies (Felipe et al., 2011; Pelligrini et al., 1999; Perren & Alsaker, 2006). Role selection for bully-victims can be consistent through a single situation (always being the victim or bully), or switch within a single situation (being the victim and then switching to a reactionary bully role).

Bullying is linked to status in two separate ways. First, individuals may use aggressive or bullying behaviors to gain status and second, individuals can use the behaviors to intimidate and therefore maintain high status (e.g. Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010; Caravita et al., 2009). While individuals may employ one or both reasons for bullying, the effective perpetration of bullying is tied to the hierarchy of peer groups in many environments (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003).

The breadth of research on bullying demonstrates that almost no demographic keeps individuals safe from becoming a victim of bullying, whether there is a single reason for low status classification, or a multiple risk profile. Previous research has explored the nature of bullying regarding gender, social class, race, physical appearance, disability and school achievement (e.g. Caravita et al., 2009; Farmer et al., 2010; Wilcox et al., 2009). While mixed results have been found in many demographic groups, those with disabilities are most

consistently placed in the victim role within bullying behaviors (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011). Individuals with disabilities are often placed in a double bind, or a multiple risk profile, which may explain their placement more consistently in the victim role (Flynt & Morton, 2004; Mishna, 2003). Being identified as 'different' due to their disability is further compounded by the behavioral differences required to successfully operate in a social world. For individuals with visual impairments, the disability labels them as 'other'. The use of braille books, guide dogs or canes, or the presence of an aide further separate individuals from their peers (Dawkins, 1996). Today there are over 59,341 children with visual impairments in public schools (American Printing House for the Blind, 2011). Most are in inclusive schools with their sighted peers. The level of support for children with visual impairments varies as there is a vast shortage of teachers who specialize in education of children with visual impairments (Sapp & Hatlin, 2010). As visual impairment encompasses a wide range of ability levels ranging from legal blindness to total blindness, each individual has unique challenges that they face in school and physical activity settings.

Studies of persons with disabilities have shown they have fewer friends and are more teased and neglected than those without disabilities (Scarpa, 2011; Taub & Greer, 2000). There has been some research that sheds light on the depth of the teasing and ridicule of children with visual impairments particularly during physical activity and sports (Lieberman, Robinson, & Rollheiser, 2006; Stuart, Lieberman & Hand, 2006). This teasing as found in these two studies is often due to poor motor performance (Wagner, Haibach, & Lieberman, in press), and lower levels of physical activity (Lieberman, Byrne, Mattern, Watt & Fernandez-Vivo, 2010).

However, these findings do not exempt them from perpetrating bullying and being labeled as a bully. Persons with observable disabilities have been shown to be bully-victims more often than those with non-observable disabilities (Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012). Taken collectively, the aforementioned research suggests that while individuals with a disability may often be placed in the role of victim, it is not an automatic placement. Factors of socialization, self-perception, behavioral choices, and other personality attributes may also contribute to which role in bullying a person with a disability adopts (e.g. Estell, Farner, Irvin, Crowther, Akos, et al., 2009; Frederickson, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Much of the research on bullying has explored the lived experiences of those in the victim role. When asked why they felt they were bullied, a common theme emerging from the victims of bullying is 'that [they] were all 'different' in some way' (Sweeting & West, 2001, p. 226). This notion of 'different' is often studied in the context of stigma. Previous

research has identified two types of stigma that negatively affect individuals: perceived stigma and self-stigma. Perceived stigma is defined as the stigmatized person's perception of how others devalue their particular social identity (Major, Kaiser, & McCoy, 2003). While culturally specific, understanding which identities are consistently seen as different is the first part of understanding perceived stigma. Often, what is seen as different is translated into lesser value (Hardin, 2007). In contrast, self-stigma occurs within the individual who has a stigmatizing condition. That is, individuals may devalue their own social identity as a function of society's reaction to the issue (Kondrat & Teater, 2009).

Self-stigma has been shown to lead persons with disabilities towards labeling themselves, subsequently leading these individuals to self-limit their abilities (Pensgaard & Sorensen, 2002). As individuals with and without disabilities live primarily segregated lives, the perceived stigma attached to disability is reinforced further (Hardin, 2007). For many with disabilities, the perceived stigma coupled with the self-stigma places them in an outsider's role while physically present in a social world (Kondrat & Teater, 2009; Taub & Greer, 2000). As the 'different' label places an individual in lower status, a key component to identifying a victim, individuals with a visible disability are an easy target for bullies (Dawkins, 1996). This coupled with self-stigma may cause varying responses to victimization for persons with disabilities.

In addition to explaining stigma, Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) can also be used to frame bullying experiences for individuals. Although Attribution Theory is quite broad, both the Kelley interpretation and studies of self-blame can be used to help explain how victims think about their bullying (Martinko & Thomson, 1998; Shelley & Craig, 2010). Taken collectively, attributions are generally studied as either internal or external to the victim.

Attribution Theory was developed to "explain how people use information to make attributions for the outcomes of others" (Martinko & Thomson, 1998, p. 273). The Kelley interpretation states that by reviewing situations, individuals will attribute the behavior of others to their person, a particular stimulus, or a situation (Martinko & Thomson, 1998). A person attribution could be the form of prejudice or negative personality characteristics in the bully, whereas the stimulus or situation closely explores the environment in which bullying takes place (Major et al., 2003). Placing the blame externally may salvage more self-esteem and efficacy within the individual, but for individuals experiencing high levels of perceived stigma this may be a more difficult attribution to make (Major et al., 2003). Crocker and Major (1989) further argued that perceiving oneself as a target of prejudice, may actually serve as a self-esteem buffer for stigmatized individuals because it provides an external rationale for their negative outcomes. Nevertheless, attributing stigmatization to prejudice does not always protect self-esteem, especially when the reason for the prejudice

or discrimination is not ambiguous (e.g., outcomes appear to be directly related to something about the victim; Major et al., 2003). As persons with disabilities are placed in low status positions (perceived stigma), Attribution Theory may help to understand to what extent they are also engaging in self-stigma. The Kelley model doesn't specifically exclude self-attributions (an individual playing an active role in shaping the behavior of others), but these areas are not as developed.

Self-attributions of victimization are studied in the form of self-blame (Shelley & Craig, 2010). Instead of exploring the situation (the external) as the cause of victimization, self-blame involves either character or behavior of the victim (the internal) as the explanation for the behavior of others (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). In these instances, any reason for negative behavior is placed upon the victim, and despite the lack of veracity in these beliefs, victims often view the self as deserving of mistreatment (Weiner, 1985). Character attributions speak to relatively fixed traits of the victim (e.g. personality, disability), whereas behavioral attributions refer to practiced behaviors exhibited by individuals that are seen reason for victimization (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). When victims attribute behavioral causes to victimization, they will often try to modify their behaviors with the hope that it will lessen the frequency of their victimization (Shelley & Craig, 2010). These internal attributions tie closely with self-stigma and can impact self-confidence (Major et al., 2003).

Research has recently begun to examine ways in which to minimize this self-stigmatization in persons with disabilities. This work has shown that feelings of empowerment engendered via participation in a disability sport helps to give individuals skills that will positively impact their lives (Pensgaard & Sorensen, 2002; Rounds, Ratcliff, Lieberman, & Hoock, 2012). Kondrat and Teater (2009) reveal that empowerment can be used to mediate the effects of self-stigmatization because the individual will generally have a more positive outlook and feel that they can have more control over their situation. Nevertheless, it is unclear if athletic activity, which is a predictor of high status individuals in able-bodied populations, will alter the status of individuals with disabilities. As sport is often used as a way to fit in with peer groups (Hartmann, 2008), perhaps an athlete with a disability athlete will be perceived as an individual of higher status and be less susceptible to bullying.

Current Work

Recent research shows that individuals with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than are their non-disabled peers, yet only 10 studies examining the impact of bullying on individuals with disabilities have been conducted in the United

States (PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, 2012). Additionally, there are even fewer studies that focus on understanding how bullying impacts individuals with visual impairments (Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2011). Recent work by Ratcliff et al. suggests that individuals with visual impairments experience bullying that is more extreme than that of national samples of sighted peers (Ratcliff, Rounds, Lieberman, & Miller, 2012), and thus the specific tactics utilized against them may also be unique. Thus one purpose of the current work is to examine the frequency and types of bullying that individuals with visual impairments experience.

As research on athletes with visual impairments and bullying is quite limited, this study explores the unknown experiences of these individuals. Given that bullies are often motivated by a desire to gain or maintain high status (Dijkstra et al., 2010; Caravita et al., 2009), sport participation often provides individuals with higher status (Peguero, 2009), and individuals with visual impairments often are often placed in low status categories (Rose et al., 2011), this study seeks to identify what role/s visually impaired athlete and non-athlete individuals play in bullying experiences. We also seek to understand how issues of stigma and attribution are used for visually impaired individuals when asked about explaining the cause of their bullying experiences.

Methods

Participants

Participants were forty-nine individuals with visual impairments ranging from legal blindness to total blindness and congenital loss as well as acquired loss. Each completed an in-person or telephone interview in exchange for a \$10 gift card as part of a larger data collection effort (see Ratcliff et al., 2012 and Rounds et al., 2012 for additional data). Thirty athletes (male=17; female=13; $M_{age} = 24.6$, $SD = 5.62$) and nineteen non-athletes (male=6; female=12; no response=1; $M_{age} = 48.7$, $SD = 12.88$) were part of the final sample. Athletes were recruited from the 2011 National Goalball Championships held at the State University of New York - the College at Brockport in Brockport, NY in the summer of 2011. Goalball is a sport specific to individuals with visual impairments. It is a game with a basketball size ball with bells inside with three athletes on each team each taking turns with offense and defense rolling the ball toward the other teams goal line. Each player wears a blindfold to equalize the playing field and the team to roll the ball past the other teams back goal line the most times in the two 10 minute halves wins. Non-athletes were recruited via online list-serves for individuals with visual impairments which led to snowball sampling (Gratton & Jones, 2010). The participants that came to the tournament were all athletes who

competed at The National Goalball Championships. It is recognized that more male athletes were recruited for this study than female athletes. As this accurately reflects the nature of sport participation broadly, this sample was determined to be representative (Coakley, 2010; Gratton & Jones, 2010). Also noted here is the variation in ages between the athletes and non-athletes due to the nature of the data collection sites. Table 1 provides a listing of participant pseudonyms and ages for each population.

Instruments

Ostracism Questions. Individuals were given the opportunity to explain about any past or present experiences they have had with ostracism and/or bullying. This scale included both open-ended and likert types of questions. Some sample questions include, “have you ever been bullied? If so how?”, “why do you think you were bullied?” and “what was your response to bullying?”. The Likert questions asked participants to rank their overall extent to which they feel they have been bullied from a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extreme bullying*).

Demographics Questionnaire. This questionnaire included questions to gather more information about participant’s particular impairment, age range, employment status, relationship status, gender. As previous research indicated several variations in bullying behaviors, all of these demographics were important considerations when interpreting past bullying experiences. Based on the legal progressions and practices of school inclusion, the age of the respondent was of particular importance.

Procedure

IRB approval was sought and secured through the State University of New York-College at Brockport. After participants were recruited, consent was secured and data collection commenced. All participants were read a questionnaire packet by a trained research assistant in-person or via telephone. All interviews were tape recorded in addition to participant answers being notated on response sheets. Participants were then given the opportunity to describe their bullying experiences and to elaborate on their reactions to these experiences. In the demographic section at the conclusion of the questionnaire packet, athletes were asked seven questions and non-athletes eight questions, regarding the nature, frequency, and location of bullying experiences. Participants were encouraged to explore their reactions to the bullying and how it impacted their general well-being. A final set of questions sought to explore further differences between the athlete and non-athlete populations. The athletes were asked specifically about the impact and importance of Goalball in their lives while the non-athlete population was asked about their hobbies in

Table 1

Pseudonyms of Participants

Non-Athlete Population (n=19)			Athlete Population (n=30)		
Pseudonym	Age ^a	Gender	Pseudonym	Age ^b	Gender
Chris	60		Alex	27	M
Andrea	37	F	Charley	25	M
Chantal	30	F	Bonnie	26	F
Erin	46	F	Earl	30	M
Barry	63	M	Ivan	33	M
Gabrielle	57	F	Danielle	22	F
Ingrid	21	F	Karl	20	M
Dean	61	M	Matthew	21	M
Karen	58	F	Otto	20	M
Felix	59	M	Richard	19	M
Melissa	35	F	Thomas	26	M
Rebecca	58	F	Lisa	28	F
Jerry	51	M	Nicole	22	F
Sebastien	31	M	Paula	32	F
Tanya	59	F	Sherry	19	F
Wendy	41	F	Virginia	18	F
Gordon	45	M	Bertha	18	F
Debby	63	F	Dolly	32	F
Helen	51	F	Fay	21	F
			Walter	24	M
			Hannah	18	F
			Arthur	29	M
			Edward	18	M
			Josephine	23	F
			Kyle	20	M
			Marco	27	M
			Omar	21	M
			Teddy	32	M
			Wilfred	28	M
			Laura	40	F

Note. ^a. Average age for Non-Athlete population is 48.74 years.

^b. Average age for Athlete Population is 24.63 years.

general. Each interview lasted on average between 30 and 45 minutes. Upon completion of the study, each participant received a \$10 gift card.

Response packets were checked for completeness by means of member checks made by several researchers (Gratton & Jones, 2010). As respondents often provided multiple answers for a single question, some frequencies of responses reported are higher than then population total. In preparing the data for content analysis, individuals who reported bullying in a work setting only were removed from analysis ($n=2$). As bullying literature and information on status are contextualized in a school setting setting, the removal of this data was necessary. The constant comparative method was used to define the concepts from the transcribed interviews from both groups (Merriam, 1998). Athlete and non-athlete data were first explored independently and then explored as a collective population of individuals with visual impairments. Emergent themes for each were discovered, and significant outlier responses were noted.

Results & Discussion

Bullying was found to be present in the experiences of the large majority of participants in this study. Only eight out of forty-nine (1 non-athlete; 7 athletes) individuals indicated that they had not been bullied in their lives. On the Likert scale, the average level of bullying reported was relatively high ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.84$; on a 7-point scale) when asked the overall extent of being bullied within their lives (Rounds, Ratcliff, Lieberman, & Hooek, 2012). These data support previous literature indicating that individuals with disabilities are often the target of bullying behaviors (Farmer et al., 2012).

Only two individuals who participated reported no bullying in school settings. Elementary and middle schools were most frequently cited by both populations of individuals as the time period and location of bullying. This finding is closely tied to the trend in age of the person doing and receiving the bullying. As younger individuals are less mature and have less awareness of how to be accepting of others, this could be a contributing factor to the frequency of bullying in schools (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009). Within the school setting, specific mentions of lower supervision areas such as "middle school hallway" (Hannah), "playground" (Nicole) and "school bus" (Jerry) were named as the site of bullying by peers. This supports previous research about situational factors that are likely to increase bullying behaviors (Wilcox, Tillyer, & Fisher, 2009).

Both populations indicated that verbal attacks were most common. Name calling, teasing, and even verbal threats were mentioned. While physical attacks were named in both

populations, they were less commonly mentioned than verbal assaults. These responses support the broader definition of bullying that is now being used which includes verbal harassment (Olweus, 1993). Pranks such as “hiding things” (Bonnie) and “making hazards” (Alex) were also mentioned by respondents, but less frequently.

Status in Bullying Experiences

A primary focus of this study was to explore the impact of status on bullying; specifically attempting to understand if athletes with disabilities hold a different status than non-athletes with visual impairments. This idea was supported within the data. In the athlete population, 23/30 participants (76.6%) indicated that they had experienced bullying. The non-athlete population reported a much higher rate with 94.7% of respondents indicating being the victim of bullying behaviors. It would appear that individuals in the non-athlete population are more consistently the victims of bullying.

Through exploring individuals' reactions to bullying behaviors, we were able to further assess role behavior within bullying experiences. When asked to explain their response to bullying behaviors, individuals who ignored behaviors or walked away were categorized as victims. For individuals who indicated an immediate reaction when being bullied (either verbal or physical), the classification of bully-victim was used (Pelligrini, 1998; Pelligrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). While no participants in the research indicated adopting a bully-only status, there is significant presence of both the victim and bully-victim roles. Within the athlete population, there was an even split between those who were victims and those who adopted the bully-victim role. Arthur described his response as being “confrontational” while Lisa was more overt in her reactions “[I] initiated fights...became a bully”. Of the athletes who adopted the bully-victim role, 43% said they fought back physically and 29% expressed a verbal form of retaliation. Laura articulated one of the strongest responses that demonstrated an understanding of the social hierarchy. She stated “occasionally I hit back if assaulted, which limited assaults from others; because I was a good fighter and it was embarrassing for others to lose to the little blind girl.” By engaging in a retaliatory manner, she was able to use her lower status label to minimize future bullying behaviors.

Within the non-athlete population, the majority of individuals (14/18) remained in the victim role and did not retaliate against the person who bullied them. Victims from both the athlete and non-athlete groups spoke of “ignoring it” (Gordon) or “ignoring them and walk[ing] away” (Rebecca) when confronted by bullies. Avoidance was another common response as Erin “transferred to another school” and Teddy indicated that he “dropped out and transferred” in response to his repeated bullying. Chantal spoke about not going on her senior trip nor to a school reunion. Other individuals spoke of a much greater emotional toll

that being a repeated victim took on them. Sebastian said he “[would get] upset ... [I was] wanting to end my life.” Unfortunately, the data collection in this research does not allow for further insights into why some individuals had more adverse reactions to bullying than others.

A few of the non-athlete population spoke about an internal consideration of becoming a bully-victim, or becoming a bully-victim if the situation called for it. Chris stated “[my response] depend[ed]... [I] kept going... if needed to be dealt with, then [I] would deal with it”. Felix responded that he “90% stood my ground”, indicating that his role varied but often adopted the bully-victim role. Melissa relegated herself to the victim role because she was “afraid it [responding] would cause more problems”. Statements such as these demonstrate a situation-specific determination of whether to remain a victim, to stand up for themselves, or to adopt a bully-victim role.

These findings of status are quite different between the athlete and non-athlete populations. The athletes interviewed were much more likely to retaliate and become a bully-victim than were the non-athletes. According to Pensgaard & Sorenson (2002) disability sport research indicates positive self-esteem outcomes from individuals who participate in sport. Moreover, disability sport is linked to empowerment which helps to buffer the negative effects of bullying (Pensgaard & Sorensen, 2002). It is possible that athletes with visual impairments receive this boost in esteem that makes them less likely to be bullied, but also more likely to be a reactionary victim (bully-victim). Bullying behaviors in general have also been shown to target individuals who are not part of sport groups, so this may also help to explain the victim role found more predominately in the non-athlete population.

Many respondents seemed to understand the label of “different” that impacted their status in the hierarchy of school settings. Danielle stated “[I] look and do things differently” and Melissa knew that she “was seen as an easy target”. A surprising finding was that some individuals tried to hide their disability. “In college [I] tried to hide that I was blind” (Jerry) and “[I] didn’t want to admit that [I] was blind” (Wendy) were responses that showed an attempt to blend in and hopefully minimize the “different” label. This hiding behavior often led to further consequences for individuals in school. Wendy’s attempt to hide caused her to quit learning how to use her cane so she “gave up and suffered later on from not using the cane” in relation to her health. Alex stated “in school, I would try to hide if possible, so I wouldn’t use the help available” which implies a negative impact on school performance. Omar indicated that the verbal harassment “caused him to not use visual aids in class” which caused him to fail some classes. While some disabilities are relatively invisible to peers, visual assistance devices are noticeable in a classroom. It seems that in attempts to decrease

the visibility of the disability, with the hope that it would decrease the quantity of bullying, individuals incurred other longer lasting consequences in their education and lifestyle (Dawkins, 1996; Graham & Juvonen, 1998).

Research has shown that adults and students often have very different perceptions about the frequency and nature of bullying activities within schools (see Bradshaw, Sawyer, O'Brennan, 2007; Newman & Murray, 2005). Regardless of this fact, adults do play a role in the social hierarchy of school settings and have an impact on the prevalence of bullying (Bauman, & Del Rio, 2006; Bradshaw et al., 2007; Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000). When asked about soliciting help, many respondents in this study indicated that asking for protection or action to be taken to deter the bullying behaviors was not successful. From those in charge actually engaging in the bullying behaviors or not stepping in to stop the actions of others, individuals with disabilities seem to distrust those in positions of power. One individual indicated that a broad range of individuals engaged in bullying behaviors, "high school to gym teachers to college... [all said] mean things and made fun of me" (Barry). Some bullying behaviors were more implied than explicit "[I had a Biology professor [who] didn't want me to be in his class in college" (Erin). While no direct discrimination was mentioned, it is clear that the individuals felt an isolation instigated by adults; "no one wants to hear from the visually impaired person" (Gordon). Some individuals explicitly asked for assistance and did not receive it. According to Melissa "Teachers would say 'I don't' want to hear about it'". Based on the information acquired in this study, it appears that the social dynamic of bullying extends beyond just peer to peer victimization.

Explaining the Bullying Behaviors

There was a marked difference in the ways in which respondents explained why they felt they were bullied. Attribution Theory and self-blame most clearly identifies internal and external causes (Major et al., 2003; Martinko & Thomson, 1998; Weiner, 1985). This internal attribution ties closely with self-stigma and can impact self-confidence (Major et al., 2003); in this population there is significant support for a possible middle ground. For persons with visual impairments, functioning in a social world requires assistance devices. While these devices arise out of necessity based on a disability, they are not truly an indication of an internalization of cause. Specifically Dolly and Bertha made references to their glasses as a reason for bullying. These responses also support existing literature about the perceived causes of bullying (Scarpa, 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001).

The athlete population more often articulated internal attributions (self-blame) for their bullying experiences. Alex, Hannah, Omar, and Thomas all explicitly stated that the

reason they were bullied was because of their visual impairment. Danielle recognized that she “look(ed) and did things differently” than others which made her a target. Lisa referred to the fact that she “stood out” and Otto blamed his albinism. These statements support behavioral self-blame as identified in able-bodied bullying research (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Shelley & Craig, 2010). These examples speak to both the character attribution, the fixed trait of disability, as well as the behavior attribution which is relatively flexible. As participant examples previously used articulate, many victims attempted to use behavioral modification to decrease the frequency of bullying but ended up suffering unintended consequences because of it.

Seven of the athletes did not provide a reason as to why they felt they were bullied, but only four athletes out of the thirty provided external attributions. Bonnie stated that she was bullied because “people are mean, [they] thought it was funny” which was echoed by Laura stating that “children are mean and ignorant”. Some attributes of bullying were also mentioned in the context of status to their peers. Arthur stated that he felt he was bullied because others “thought they could get away with it”. This lends support for the idea about engaging in bullying behaviors being able to maintain the status within peer groups (Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010; Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009). These few examples show support of Kelley’s Model of Attribution Theory, specifically external person attributes of the bully.

The non-athlete population reported significantly contrasting reasons for bullying compared to the athlete population. Whereas the athlete population primarily engaged in self-blame, the non-athlete population predominately demonstrated an external attribution of bullying with many responses being linked to status in peer groups. Chris stated that he was bullied because “they thought they were better than me” and Ingrid indicated that a person would bully her to “show power”. Recognition of low status, or being an easy person to pick on, was mentioned by Ingrid, Rebecca, and Melissa. Gordon expressed that he wasn’t really sure why he was bullied but that he guessed “impressing friends maybe? Makes you tough picking on a visually impaired person?”. An outright critique of the personalities of others was also clearly articulated. Wendy and Sebastian stated that kids are just mean; Barry guessed that the insecurity of some people encouraged them to be mean to others. Karen went so far as to state that for others it seemed “fun to pick (on her)”. Only 33% of non-athletes engaged in self-blame and these were similar explanations to those in the athlete population.

When combining these attributions for bullying with the questions about sport versus hobby participation a very interesting pattern emerges. When the athlete population was asked, “what does Goalball mean to you?” several participants had the simple answer of

“everything” (Teddy, Kyle, Fay, Otto, and Danielle). Ranging from reasons of “interactions with others who are like me” (Ivan) to “a good experience to meet and compete” (Bonnie), the athlete population was focused on the social nature of sport participation and how it fostered inclusion and personal growth. As previous literature indicates, sport participation fosters the development of self-concept, self-esteem, and social identity (Scarpa, 2011; Taub & Greer, 2000). Marco felt that if he didn’t play “(he) wouldn’t be a normal teen”. Danielle indicated that Goalball was critical to her development of self. She stated “[Goalball] is how I learned to be sufficient and who I grew to be. (It) changed my life, without [the] team I would have failed high school.”

Other athletes found the sport to be a road to acceptance of their disability or avenue of acceptance in society. Paula said that her sport participation was “a big reason why I don’t regret being visually impaired. [I] play on [the] US team, [and have] been able to travel the world and represent my country. I would not have done the things I did without being visually impaired”. To Bertha, Goalball made her “feel part of something; [be a] time to shine... [feel] worthy”. All respondents indicated the positive experiences that Goalball had brought them and most implied ideas of socialization as a prominent rationale for their continued participation in the sport.

As uncovered earlier, the athlete population engaged in mostly self-blame attributions of bullying behaviors. While the bullying behaviors deplete esteem and confidence in its victims, sport participation is something that can build both attributes (Pensgaard & Sorensen, 2002; Kondrat and Teater, 2009). This project may suggest that athletes are choosing to engage in sport as a coping mechanism or a way to build what others have attempted to destroy. Richard said that Goalball gives him a “sense of self-worth” and Sherry said that sports were her thing because they “give me confidence”. When Teddy plays, he gets the “feeling of (an) elite athlete.” As sport is seen as a way to teach values and character for children growing up in the United States, it is clear that athletes with visual impairments also feel these same sport benefits (Coakley, 2010). As these athletes readily engage in self-blaming for victimization, the outlet of sport can be a way to provide visible demonstrations of personal worth and confidence that may counteract the internalizations of poor character or ‘different’ behavior common in self-blame.

While the athlete population readily engaged in organized sport activities, the non-athlete population cited mostly hobbies where they do not interact with others. Of the eighteen non-athletes who reported being bullied, the most frequently cited hobbies were reading, knitting/crocheting, exercise, or computer usage. Although exercise can be social in nature, the non-athlete population most frequently mentioned activities that were individualized such as treadmill walking (Helen, Wendy, and Ingrid) or swimming (Wendy

and Rebecca). A few individuals indicated activities such as playing cards and dancing that are more interactive, but very few. When providing attributions for bullying, the non-athlete population primarily cited external reasons, specifically the meanness of others. This provides an interesting interpretation of why many of their hobby activities are done alone. If history has taught these individuals that the able-bodied world will treat them poorly, it makes sense that they would choose settings in which they are not likely to have their relaxation time interrupted by others.

Consistent with findings in the athlete population, these individuals spoke of the extreme pleasure that these activities brought them. Participating in their individual hobbies allowed Felix to “detox” from life, for Chris, knitting and reading “helps to relax” and Chantal stated that crocheting and reading “(allows me to find) tranquility and relaxation”. Barry, who cited more outgoing hobbies, indicated that the participation in social dancing had “allow(ed) (him) to be able to share both negative and positive experiences and techniques to overcome past experiences... [I’m] grateful to do that and makes me feel better”. Based on information from both populations, hobbies and sport participation seem to play a critical role in their personal happiness.

Conclusion

This exploratory study provided an interesting introduction to the understanding of bullying experiences in athletes and non-athletes with visual impairments. The project supported previous findings of individuals with disabilities frequently being the target of bullying behaviors, but also showed some stark differences in the two populations. Of the three possible roles in bullying, the victim was most often reported within both populations, but the athletes with visual impairments also adopted the bully-victim role more often than their non-athlete counterparts. As sport has been shown to develop confidence and esteem in participants, it is possible that these athletes feel better equipped to stand up for themselves or defend themselves, therefore becoming a bullying themselves (Coakley, 2010; Pensgaard & Sorenson, 2002).

Exploring the attributions for bullying also showed differences between the two populations. While the athlete population was most often engaging in self-blame behaviors, the non-athlete population was more likely to provide external attributions as the reason they were bullied. Both populations showed an understanding of both self-stigma and perceived stigma in relation to their bullying experiences. We hypothesize that these attributions play a key role in understanding the types of activities these populations chose to engage in. Non-athlete populations consistently selected hobbies that were solitary, isolating them from other

individuals. As this population made frequent external attributions, often the personality of their bullies being the reason for their behavior, it then follows that they would select to isolate themselves in order to make bullying less likely to occur. Athletics have long been a method for individuals to prove self-worth and fit in with peers (Coakley, 2010; Hartmann, 2008). When individuals with visual impairments self-blame, sport participation can be one mechanism to boost their confidence; previous research has demonstrated this benefit for those who participate in disability sport (Kondrat & Teater, 2009).

Limitations and Future Research

Further research in this area should be designed to overcome some of the limitations present in this study. This project did not achieve ideally comparable samples of athletes and non-athletes. Aside from the differences in sample size, there was also a significant difference in the average ages of each population. As legal elements regarding access and education have changed significantly in the past twenty years due to the Americans with Disability Act, contextual elements are likely to have contributed to some of the variation between populations (McCarthy, 2003). Future research should seek more comparable populations regarding age demographics and possibly degree of visual impairment. As behavioral self-blame is linked to degree of disability, it is possible that this is also contributing to differences in population responses. By limiting the sport choice to Goalball only, sport specific differences are also omitted from this research. Further research should expand sport type to include other disability sports to reach individuals with different skill sets.

By utilizing a population that is generally unexplored in scholarly work, this project provides previously unknown information about bullying experiences for athlete and non-athlete populations who are visually impaired. Indications of verbal harassment support more recent definitions of bullying and confirm previous research about bullying experiences for populations of individuals with disabilities (Sweeting & West, 2001; Taub & Greer, 2000). New insights into the roles that individuals with visual impairment play in bullying experiences were uncovered. Research on status in bullying indicates that athletes are often part of a higher status group that takes the role of bully and persons with disabilities are most likely the victim (Dijkstra et al., 2008; Peeters et al., 2010), this research found that some athletes with disabilities are adopting a bully-victim role. Self-blame and external attribution differences between athlete and non-athlete populations indicate that explanations for bullying may play a role in hobby choice for visually impaired individuals. Ultimately, further research is needed to expand understanding about individuals with visual impairment, sporting and hobby choices, and their experiences with bullying.

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