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Bullying in School Among Children and Adolescents from Cognitive and Developmental Perspectives: Implications for Prevention Practices

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Abstract

This essay provides a comprehensive analysis of school-based bullying from both cognitive and socio-developmental perspectives, illustrating its nature as a group process shaped by various factors within socio-ecological systems. Bullying is conceptualised as a detrimental universal phenomenon with long-term implications for children and adolescents, manifesting in different forms due to distinct gender and age profiles. Emphasising the role of the peer group within this dynamic process, the essay highlights the significance of proximal social factors, group relationships, and the individuals' diverse social identities. The implications of the various participant roles within bullying, from bullies and victims to bystanders, are also explored. Contextual factors and individual characteristics that predict bystanders' responses to bullying are discussed. Despite the limitations of self-reported bullying behaviour and the difficulty of manipulating individual perceptions of group identification, this essay underscores the necessity of multifaceted interventions for bullying, like empathy training and bystander interventions, combined with supportive school environments and parental involvement. Further longitudinal studies across different developmental stages are proposed for future research.

Keywords: school-based bullying, group process, social identities, bullying intervention, group norms

1. Introduction

School-based bullying can be defined as aggressive behaviours that repeatedly happen in the school context that involves intentions of physical or emotional intention, aggression and a power imbalance between victims and bullies (Kim et al., 2022; Knox et al., 2022). Bullying is a universal phenomenon that has negative consequences for bullies, victims, and bullies/victims, and can even have long-term negative consequences until adulthood (Barboza et al., 2009). A lot of surveys in different countries have shown that bullying causes mental health problems in children, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal behaviours, and other maladaptive behaviours (Moore et al., 2017). For instance, it is reported that in the UK, adolescents from 11 to 19 years old with mental disorders are more likely to be bullied or bully others than those without mental disorders (Vizard et al., 2020). Previous studies have focused on the causes, consequences, prevalence and possible interventions towards different types of bullying (Armitage, 2021; Dyer & Teggart, 2007; Jadambaa et al., 2019). There is significant gender and age difference in bully types. For example, boys are more likely than girls to bully others in overt-physical ways, whereas girls prefer indirect/relational bullying (Scheithauer et al., 2006). Both victimization and bullying behaviours increase with age (Zychet al., 2020). Bullying behaviours in schools occurs both within cross-age groups and peer groups.

In terms of children and adolescents' development, bullying can be defined as repeated and sustained group behaviour that occurs over time (Barboza et al., 2009). Children and adolescents live in a complex socio-ecological system, including microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems and chronosystems.

It is helpful to understand bullying outside the box of bullies/victims because victimisation and bullying experiences can be affected by various ecological systems (Shute & Slee, 2021). In particular, some proximal social factors in the microsystem, such as peer group relationships, teacher and family support, can moderate the relationship between individual characteristics and broader factors like culture and societal norms, which can be used to prevent children from engaging in bullying (Shute & Slee, 2021). In addition, it is found that peer relationships are very important for children's well-being in terms of emotions and behaviours. A positive and high-quality peer relationship can foster children's self-esteem and life satisfaction (Albarello et al., 2021; Hartup & Stevens, 1999). In school, forming appropriate peer relationships can help children go through developmental stages successfully and prevent possible adjustment problems (Demirtaş-Zorbaz & Ergene, 2019).

From the cognitive perspective, individuals have different social identities, such as race, gender, and religion. Children and adolescents tend to form different groups based on different principles of categorization. In school, bullying is a common phenomenon involving the role of individuals in the group. There are four distinct participant roles in general bullying—reinforcer of the bully; assistant to the bully; defender of the victim; outsider (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017). In addition, bystanders play a critical role in the bullying's intervention through different attitudes (positive–neutral–indifferent–negative) and behaviours (acting or not acting), which can be affected by intergroup processes (Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2021; Salmivalli, 2010). Adolescents are more likely to assist an ingroup victim than an outgroup victim (Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Furthermore, different context factors (such as social norms) and individual characteristics (such as gender, and age) can predict bystander's responses to bullying. For example, girls are more likely to support bullying intervention than boys during the 12-14 age; prejudice can be more acceptable with age among adolescents (Gönültaş & Mulvey, 2021).

School-based bullying, as a group process, can be influenced by various levels of the socio-ecological system. Children and adolescents play the roles of bullies, victims, bully/victims, or bystanders who can act as victim-defenders or bully-reinforcers (Eslea et al., 2004; Salmivalli et al., 2011). To better understand the role of children and adolescents who participate in the dynamic bullying process and peer group's function in bullying, this essay attempt to analyse school-based bullying from a cognitive and developmental perspective. Section two focuses on the potential risk and protective factors for bullying among children and adolescents in school; section three provides a more detailed explanation of bullying as a group process; and section four provides some targeted interventions for children and adolescents as well as suggestions for educational practices in school.

2. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Evidence

This section introduces potential risks and protective factors in children and adolescents' development based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. And social identity theory reveals how it shapes intergroup biases among children, leading to bullying behaviours, which significantly impact their well-being and social development.

2.1 Understanding Bullying from a Socio-Ecological Perspective

From the individual perspective, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model gives a clear explanation of individual bullying behaviours in a complex system. And such behaviours are dynamically constructed over time as a result of interactions between individuals and environmental influences.

Students' behaviours in school are influenced by many factors at different levels of the socio- ecological model. At the micro and meso-level, individual characteristics, family function, peer relationships, teachers and their interaction can directly influence children's development of behaviours. From the individual perspective, some psychopathic traits can predict adolescents' bullying behaviours, such as narcissism, and impulsivity. A high level of narcissism is associated with more stable bullying, whereas a high level of impulsivity is associated with victimisation (Fanti & Kimonis, 2012). And it is found that individual self-esteem and self-efficacy can protect children from bullying (Barboza et al., 2009). In family, there is evidence that unsupportive parent-child relationships can predict aggression in elementary school (Rubin et al., 2004). And parental attachment is directly related to boys' peer help-seeking behaviours when confronted with bullying (Knox et al., 2022). In school, high levels of peer connections can help popular children in a group promote the social status of aggression over time (Mann et al., 2015; Rodkin et al., 2015). And positive parental support and good relationships with teachers play an important role in reducing the likelihood of bullying behaviours. As the likelihood of bullying increases, the impact of these factors grows dramatically (Mann et al., 2015).

At the exo-level, negative school climate and parents' bullying experiences in the workplace may have an indirect negative impact on children's behaviour (Barboza et al., 2009). Parents who experienced bullying outside the home may replicate that behaviour at home. For example, South Korean mothers who are bullied in the workplace have negative views of parental roles and negative attitudes towards children, and they are unable

to detect their children's signals of distress or needs sensitively (Jahng, 2020). Parents' workplaces can also influence peer relationships through possible family movements (Chenet al., 2006). According to Piaget's development model, children have different motivations for friendship formation at different developmental stages, which helps parents take action to protect vulnerable children from bullying. From 3-6 years old, children become more interested in playing with others, begin to form momentary friendships and understand social norms. Parents can support this stage by engaging children in group activities and talking about feelings and emotions. From 6-12 years old, children can take a third perspective to view friendship and learn to navigate complex social situations. They develop a deeper understanding of friendships, social rules, and group dynamics. Then parents can encourage social development by discussing peer relationships, teaching conflict resolution, and fostering a sense of responsibility and respect for others. After 12 years old, adolescents begin to form their identity and place a strong emphasis on peer relationships and may experience social challenges. In this stage, parents can guide on social issues, and encourage healthy peer relationships.

At the macro level, individuals live in a society with different cultural values and socio- economic status. Culture may moderate the effect of sex and age on bullying. Some behaviours that are acceptable for one gender or age in one culture are rejected or considered aggressive in another (Eslea et al., 2004). In addition, different cultural dimensions can influence the effects of peer groups on children's behaviour. For example, the effects of peer groups on individuals are much stronger in collectivist societies than in individualist societies (Pozzolietal., 2012). In cross-cultural studies, it is found that bullying is related to income inequality in different societies (Volk et al., 2015). Societal values can also influence how individuals treat others. Scandinavian countries appear to have lower levels of bullying due to a greater cultural emphasis on anti-bullying efforts than other Western countries (Volk et al., 2015). And Compared to Latino, African American students are more likely to be perceived as aggressive (Graham & Juvonen, 2002). Multi-interactions between the above elements in different levels can develop overtime in abroad context among children and adolescents. Previous studies found that immigrants are more likely to be bullied because of fear towards unfamiliar newcomers with different ethnic backgrounds and social norms. And that individual preconceived fear may be influenced by peers, parents, and mass media, which associate immigrants with negative attributes and emotions, leading children to avoid and isolate them (Mazzone et al., 2018).

2.2 Childhood and Adolescent Intergroup Bias and Bullying: A Social Identity Theory Perspective

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is considered an efficient approach to explaining intergroup relationships, and how people perceive themselves in the social context. It emphasises the distinction between personal identity as an individual and personal identity as a member of a group. Based on social identity theory (SIT), intergroup relations may lead to prejudice and bias towards outgroups, which makes individuals of ingroup tend to protect and promote their ingroups' positive distinctiveness, leading to a positive perception of an ingroup. School-aged children tend to form peer groups and show ingroup preference based on similarities in gender, sex, shared activities, or ethnicity (Nesdale et al., 2007). The similarity between different groups may lead to intergroup threat, which may further evoke fear and aggressive emotions and behaviours when highly identified ingroup memberships feel impacted (Riek et al., 2006). Group contrast effects promote the formation of group identity and shared group norms by emphasising differences and downplaying similarities between groups. Children in peer groups tend to blend in with other ingroup members and conform to group norms. At the same time, they can maintain their position within their group's social hierarchy based on individual differences (Hymel et al., 2015). And a highly identified group may lead to deindividuation (Abrams & Hogg, 1990), which brings a reduction of self-awareness and sense of responsibility, resulting in aggressive behaviours. The purpose of deindividuation is to make individual behaviours consistent with the group, which is common in an anonymous environment, such as cyberbullying.

Children exhibit intergroup biases from an early age and develop various social identities in a dynamic process. Children at the age of 4 express ingroup social identity and develop outgroup negativity until 7 years old (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017). Then, children may categorise themselves into peer groups with similar identities—There is some evidence about group prototypes that can be used to interpret the relationships between individual self-esteem and social identity, which influence people's group behaviours and attitudes. Ingroup favouritism is closely related to a high level of self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 2010). Individuals may accept outgroup blaming and bully outgroup members because bullying can help them maintain higher social status than outgroups (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017). And, between the ages of 4 and 7, high-status children show an increase in prejudice toward low-status children, which decreases between the ages of 8 and 10. Low-status children, on the other hand, show an increase in prejudice toward high-status children at a later age and fail to show the decrease seen in the majority of children (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). In addition to group status, group roles can also affect children's attitudes towards intergroup bullying. There is evidence that individuals are more likely to support their group when it is a victimised group, whereas when it is a bully group, their in-group preference diminishes (Gini, 2007).

The importance of the relationship between social identity and peer groups is reflected in children's well-being, sense of belonging and particularly during late childhood and early adolescence (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Konstantoni, 2012). If children consider themselves as the insider of peer groups, they will have a higher level of social well-being, including trust and positive attitudes (Albarello et al., 2021).

Given that SIT is too broad and focuses more on intergroup favouritism than outgroup derogation, the development of specific identities and individual characteristics should be considered across situations and over time (Hornsey, 2008; Huddy, 2001). And a comparison between different groups based on individual traits naturally introduces bias and prejudices, such as intergroup favouritism, and outgroup hostility (Brownetal., 2001). Thus, bullying is introduced in the following section as a group process about categorization and how self-schema can be mapped onto a group, as well as intergroup effects of bullying at various socio-ecological levels.

3. Bullying as a Group Process

Bullying in schools is deeply rooted in self-categorization and social identity theories, where individuals form groups based on similarities, leading to distinct behaviours and stereotypes. Influenced by group norms, roles, and intergroup comparisons, bullying behaviours can spread, particularly in situations that encourage deindividuation or anonymity. Considering these dynamics is essential in addressing bullying from multiple perspectives.

3.1 Categorization and Group Identification in Bullying

In school, bullying is a common phenomenon involving the role of individuals in the group. There is a significant difference between self-perception and group-based social identities. Individuals in various contexts form social perceptions based on their perceptions and self- schemas through categorization, which is a common and accessible way to help us organise and structure the world more conveniently (Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Bodenhausen et al., 2012).

According to the self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982), individuals can act as a group based on various social identities, such as racial, ethnic, and gender identity. Individuals tend to build groups with similar ones and contrast against different ones. The comparison between ingroups and outgroups contributes to different prototypical attitudes (Abrams & Hogg, 2010). Prototypes are manifested in the similarity between individuals and other group members, and they can accentuate differences between groups. Categorization is linked to group prototypical traits, which can vary depending on which category is more salient in a specific context (Bodenhausen et al., 2012). There are different prototypical behavioural traits between victim and bully groups. For example, it is found that bullies are often characterised as prestigious, dominant, aggressive, and masculine, whereas victims exhibit both anxiety and aggressive traits (Marinucci et al., 2023; Moura et al., 2011).

In the process of categorization, individuals can place themselves in a group based on a certain category and then connect with other ingroup members, improving their group identification and shaping their sense of belongingness to the group. Despite its adaptive functions, categorisation can lead to stereotypes. On the one hand, stereotypes can reflect group differences in some ways by preventing individuals from defying stereotypes, even though people may behave stereotypically due to social pressure and fear (Rudman, 2010). On the other hand, insufficient or ambiguous information, as well as prior expectations about individuals or a certain group can easily lead to biased perceptions, such as self-fulfilling prophecies. Individual behaviours can be changed by stereotypic expectancies, making them stereotype congruent. For example, negative stereotypes will be formed if it is perceived that the other group is competing with your group (Esseset al., 2005). Once stereotypes associated with specific categories are activated, individuals are more likely to validate the related bias or prejudices automatically by retrieving stereotype-consistent information from long-term memory in the future (Bodenhausen et al., 2012).

Although children and adolescents generally have negative attitudes toward bullying, the explicit evaluations of bullying depend on their role and their group roles (Pouwels et al., 2017). According to SIT, individuals' behaviours and attitudes can be influenced by group norms and manifest similarly within groups. Group norms with bullying can promote group members to display bullying behaviours and the same group members tend to display similar levels of bullying behaviours (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009). In addition, group identification is very important to predict attitudes and persistence in bullying. There is a link between individual popularity and defending against bullying, which depends on the group norms. Popular students are more likely to assist victims in a group with social costs but are less likely to defend victims in a classroom where bullying is prevalent (Peets et al., 2015).

There is a link between identification at various socio-ecological levels and individual bullying behaviours. At the school level, it is found that strong school identification that emphasises belongingness, respect, and care significantly predict decreased bullying perpetration and peer victimisation overtime (Turner et al., 2014). In

addition, exclusive peer group norms can weaken the effect of school norms when children are directly accountable to teachers (Mcguire et al., 2015). At the micro-level of peer groups, bullying can also occur when there is intragroup contrast, such as the black sheep effect—In-group deviants are more negatively evaluated than out-group members, resulting in some marginal members of the group at risk of bullying (Marques et al., 1988). Because prototypical group members can mostly represent their group and have the most in common with other group members, they are more likely to bully others than peripheral members in a group with bullying (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009). Non-prototypical group members, such as less powerful and popular students in a group, may be more likely to be bullied because bullying is closely related to higher social status (Thornberg & Delby, 2019). And numbers of victims in a group may influence different attributional styles and negative outcomes of bullying. For example, when there are other victims, it is more likely to contribute to external attribution, whereas being the only victim is more likely to contribute to self-blaming attribution and has a lower level of self-esteem and well-being (Salmivalli, 2010).

3.2 Intergroup Effects in Bullying

Individuals can form perceptions of their own groups and group identification through intergroup comparison, which distinguishes individual behaviour from group behaviour. Firstly, at the group level, bullying plays an important role in promoting groupthink over individual goals, which is more likely to occur in a group with dominant authorities and high levels of group norms (Volk et al., 2015). When group members with strong group identification face a threat and believe that certain behaviours (such as bullying) can improve their social status, they will develop outgroup hostility (Durkin et al., 2012; Nesdale et al., 2008; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004). In addition, relative social status can affect individual perceptions of the in-group and out-group. For example, lower-status in-group members (victims) tend to attribute the responsibility of bullying to high-status out-group (bullies) in case their values and self-image would be threatened (Gini, 2007). Furthermore, there is age and gender difference in the effects of group norms. Older children are more likely to accept peer ingroups' norms about bullying behaviours than younger children because they are afraid to be rejected by ingroup (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017). And girls' behaviours are more likely to be affected by group norms than boys' (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004).

Secondly, deindividuation can explain how bullying behaviours spread in groups. When the intergroup context is salient, intragroup members would protect their group identity at the expense of individual identity (Tarrant, 2002). Individuals transform themselves from independent individuals to representatives of a group for collective action as a group, which then promotes some violence against a targeted out-group. Furthermore, deindividuation does not always result in negative consequences. It simply increases the likelihood of group members adhering to the group norms (Branscombe & amp; Baron, 2017). Peer groups make members feel anonymous, which may encourage group members to act more aggressively than individuals acting alone in a peer group where bullying behaviours are acceptable (Vaillancourt et al., 2009). Some factors may influence deindividuation's effect on bullying. It is found that deindividuation will become more extreme as the relative group size increases (Abrams & Hogg, 2010). And youth can bully more seriously in cyberspace because the online environment reduces self-awareness and diffuses responsibility for their actions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014).

Considering the complexity of school bullying, it's essential to view it from various perspectives across the socio-ecological system, including individual personalities, familial influences, teacher interactions, and cultural norms, as each plays a unique role in the bullying process.

4. Bullying Intervention in Educational Policy and Practice

According to the above explanations of bullying in school, children's bullying in groups with various bullying roles can develop in different contexts overtime. Bullying interventions in school should be considered in relation to group processes and different socio-ecological systems, such as empathy training and moral education in schools, intergroup contact and bystander intervention in peer groups.

Childhood is thought to be an ideal time to intervene in bullying behaviours based on intergroup bias, such as decreasing self-perception of prejudice and discrimination (Skinner & Meltzoff, 2019). Bullying is closely related to children and adolescents' group formation based on different identities, such as gender and ethnic identity. For example, girls are more likely to be bullied by boys rather than by female peers with verbal bullying; and there is a negative relationship between ethnic identity and aggression (Garandeau et al., 2009). From the individual perspective, it is found that training in empathy and perspective-taking has a beneficial effect on intergroup attitudes (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). According to Hoffman, (2000) theory of empathy development stages, empathy develops as age and early childhood is a critical stage for improving empathy. Children during preschool can take others' perspectives and respond in less egocentric ways, then develop high-level cognition with an extended range of appropriate reactions in middle childhood. It has been discovered that empathy can influence children's bystander behaviours when it comes to bullying. Children who can

empathise with victims are more likely to prevent bullying from occurring (Nickerson et al., 2008). Furthermore, it is critical to consider children's social identities and group norms concerning their moral reasoning at various stages of development (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017). Some moral education programmes can be used to prevent and address bullying in school. Peers, parents, and teachers all play important roles in children's moral development, which can help children learn how to respect others with different identities or backgrounds. For example, social-emotional learning can be used by teachers and parents to monitor and intervene in children and adolescents' emotional or behavioural problems in peer groups (Hymel et al., 2018). And character education aims to teach students core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, fairness, trustworthiness, caring, and citizenship, which includes values, such as treating others with kindness and standing up against bullying (Character Education Framework Guidance, 2019).

In terms of group process, social interactions in groups to some extent influence bully, victim, and bystander roles. Intergroup contact can have a positive influence on bullying intervention by encouraging bystander behaviour and helping to reduce intergroup bias, discrimination, and prejudice (Fowler & Buckley, 2022). Bystander intervention in peer groups can protect victims from further bullying in a group by forming protective friendships and rallying supporters, and more bystanders defending victims can in turn reduce the bullying behaviours (Salmivalli, 2014). Considering that bystanders' behaviours in groups are affected by group norms and social position, other factors in micro- and meso-systems can help to prevent bullying behaviours, such as school belongingness, parents' educational level, and teaching strategies. It is found that a higher sense of school belonging can help reduce bullying victimisation; and individuals with middle-level educated parents are less vulnerable to being bullied as a minority than those with highly or poorly educated parents (Pitsia & Mazzone, 2021). And teachers can accommodate peer group norms with classroom norms by directing students toward productive academic and social behaviours (Hymel et al., 2018).

5. Conclusion

This essay combines cognitive and socio-developmental perspectives to explain bullying as a group process in school and provides a comprehensive perspective on feasible educational bullying prevention practices. The socio-ecological model describes the risk and protective factors of bullying in the development of children and adolescents. Some proximal factors such as parents, individual characteristics and school function have an optimal influence on children's bullying behaviours at school. From the cognitive perspective, social identity theory and self-categorisation theory provide an interactive psychological mechanism of peer groups and the influence of group categorization in a specific context. Children and adolescents have various social identities and categorise themselves into different groups; they connect with other ingroup members to improve group cohesion. Any threat to group identity may result in aggressive behaviours, which are exacerbated by intergroup contrast. Once bullying group norms have formed, strong group identification can increase the prevalence of bullying attitudes and behaviours by aligning individual behaviour with group norms. Furthermore, when there is intragroup contrast, group members who deviate from group prototypes are more likely to be bullied and their peer evaluation is more negative than outgroup members when there is intergroup contrast.

However, there are some limitations based on these two perspectives. To begin, the above empirical evidences have different operational definitions of bullying behaviours, which are mostly measured by self-report, resulting in a low representation of the actual situation. Secondly, from a methodological point of view, it is difficult to manipulate individual developmental perceptions of group identification due to some factors that may threaten group distinctiveness, such as gender, race, and culture. Thirdly, there is rare evidence of the influence of peer groups on bullying in a broad context across countries, which limits the explanation of the relationship between societal norms and bullying in peer groups. Further research can focus on longitudinal studies of children and adolescents bullying at different developmental stages.

Bullying in childhood and adolescence involves group dynamics and requires multi-level interventions, such as empathy training and bystander interventions. These measures, combined with a supportive school environment and parental involvement, can help reduce intergroup bias and prevent bullying.

In summary, children's bullying behaviours in a group can develop over time as a result of various factors in socio-ecological systems, and different social identities and group norms can influence the intergroup relations between victims and bullies. And some effective practices can aid in bullying intervention in peer groups, such as cultivating high-quality friendships and encouraging intergroup contact.

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