



## A path analysis on school bullying and critical school environment variables: A social capital perspective



JoLynn V. Carney<sup>a</sup>, Yanhong Liu<sup>b,\*</sup>, Richard J. Hazler<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education, The Pennsylvania State University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Counseling and Human Services, Syracuse University, United States

<sup>c</sup> Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education, The Pennsylvania State University, United States

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### ABSTRACT

School bullying has gained intensive attention from school personnel and researchers, but still, little is known about the effects of bullying perpetrating, victimization, and bystanding on critical school environment variables. Guided by the social capital theory and empirical findings, the study addressed the complexity of relations among bullying perpetrating, victimization, bystanding and students' perceived school support, acceptance of diversity at school, and perceived school connectedness. Participants in the study were 973 students in grades 3–6 from two public school districts located in the northeastern United States. The final path model supported the hypotheses that, a) bullying perpetrating has direct as well as indirect, negative effects on perceived school support, acceptance of diversity, and school connectedness; and b) bystanding has a direct effect on students' perceived acceptance of diversity at school and indirectly affects school connectedness. Results of the study aligned with the social capital perspective on positive human relations and social outcomes. Findings from this study reinforced the need of anti-bullying initiatives at the individual, group, and school-wide levels. They further underscored the importance of enhancing school support and acceptance of diversity at school.

### 1. Introduction

School bullying is a form of interpersonal violence that is a barrier to learning and can lead to short- and long-term consequences (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016) impacting everyone involved including youth who bully, youth who are targets of bullying, and bystanders who witness the abuse of others (Hong & Espelage, 2012). It is important to acknowledge that participant roles are not stagnant and instead can fluctuate depending on context and circumstances (Gumpel, Zioni-Koren, & Bekerman, 2014; Ryoo, Wang, & Swearer, 2015). The dynamic process of bullying yields differing outcomes related to individual dispositional factors and organizational structures. A student who may be a target at one point in time can, in another context, become the perpetrator. Bullying is typically defined by researchers and other entities like the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and United States Department of Education (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7) as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”

School bullying is recognized as a global issue that has captured the worldwide attention of policymakers and educators (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015) due to occurrence across all grade levels (Hong & Espelage, 2012), with middle school stage identified as the peak followed by a significant decrease at the high school level (Espelage & Horne, 2008). Cross-national studies have been conducted to compare ratios of bullying that occurs in different countries. One relatively recent cross-national study reported bullying ranged from approximately 9–45% for boys and 5–36% for girls (Craig et al., 2009). The latest United States statistics from 2013 indicated that 22% of students reported being bullied at school during the academic year, which is a 6% decrease since 2011 and the lowest since 2005 when this type of data were first collected based on the 2015 School Crime Supplement to National Crime Victimization Survey. Bullying behaviors appear to start early, with researchers suggesting preschool as students enter a formal education context (Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou, & Didaskalou, 2011), while others propose 2nd grade where a majority of perpetrators conducted at least one other aggressive act later during grades 3–5 (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005).

School bullying is linked to direct impact on victims including short- and long-term psychological distress (Rueger & Jenkins, 2014) such as

\* Corresponding author at: 130 College Place Suite 440, Syracuse, NY 13244, United States.

E-mail address: [yliu363@syr.edu](mailto:yliu363@syr.edu) (Y. Liu).

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depression later in life (Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011a). Bullying victimization was also found to be associated with students' internalizing problems such as suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Hong, Kral, & Sterzing, 2015), feelings of abandonment and isolation (Carney, 2000), and substance misuse (Hong et al., 2015).

Bullying perpetrators, like victims, scored higher on suicidal ideation than those who did not experience bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Hong et al., 2015). A meta-analysis by Gini and Pozzoli (2009) provided evidence that perpetrators were at a higher risk for psychosomatic symptoms than those who were not involved. Other consequences for bullying perpetrators include being at higher risk academically compared with students who were not involved in bullying (Kowalski & Limber, 2013), being more likely to engage in substance use (Radliff, Wheaton, Robinson, & Morris, 2012), and having higher probability of other adverse outcomes across the lifespan such as perpetrating (Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011b).

Consequences have also been demonstrated for bystanders. A seminal paper by Rigby and Slee (1993) associated bystanding experience with feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Bystanders have been found to have elevated mental health risks (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009) as well as a higher risk for symptoms such as interpersonal insensitivity (feelings of being hurt), feelings of helplessness, and potential for suicidal ideation (Rivers & Noret, 2013). The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) proposed that more research needs to be conducted on the impact of witnessing bullying.

Recognizing the fact that bullying at a young age could have long-term detrimental effects on youth development (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016), we examined, in the current study, the effects of bullying at the elementary school level. Social capital theory (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), featured by an outcome emphasis, was thus utilized for this study to explore effects of bullying perpetrating, victimization, and bystanding experiences on school environment variables pertaining to school social capital.

### 1.1. The social capital theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinnings of social capital are complex and multifaceted (Ahn, 2012; Thornberg, 2015). Social capital theorists maintain that positive relations and norms in a social network facilitate desirable outcomes that benefit all individuals within the network (Coleman, 1988). Distinct from physical capital (e.g., materials; machines; tools), social capital focuses on “changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action” (Coleman, 1988, p. S100). It is intangible and centered around relationships among individuals (Coleman, 1988; Goddard, 2003). Key concepts include *social network*, *actors*, and *norms*. Trustworthiness, reciprocity, and acceptance were highlighted as core elements of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

The social capital theoretical framework has been discussed in the realm of education (e.g., Ahn, 2012; Goddard, 2003), but rarely linked to the phenomenon of school bullying, despite agreement that bullying itself reveals dynamics of individual and group human relations. Research by Carney, Jacob, and Hazler (2011) first made the connection between school bullying and social capital outcomes demonstrated through students' perceived trust, fairness, and helpfulness at school. A later conclusion drawn from a meta-analysis of variables affecting bullying (Hernandez De Frutos, 2013) was that the intimidation and violence involved in bullying “generates influence among groups of friends, a type of social capital” (p.311). The generalized trust levels of social capital were also found in a more recent study to influence the relationship between peer victimization and psychosocial and school adjustment for youth (Betts, Houston, Steer, & Gardner, 2017).

The context of the current study expands on the research on social capital and bullying by envisioning schools as a form of social network and students and adults (e.g., teachers and staff) as actors. We investigated the core components of social capital through measurable

constructs associated with trust, fairness, and acceptance (Carney et al., 2011; Coleman, 1988). Guided by social capital theory, the current study aimed to develop and test a path model that demonstrates direct and indirect effects of bullying on students' perceived school support, acceptance of diversity, and perception of school connectedness.

### 1.2. Target variables

Three types of bullying experiences (i.e., perpetrating; victimization; and bystanding) were investigated as exogenous variables. School support was examined to assess students' perceived support from teachers and other adults at school. School connectedness and acceptance of diversity at school were two other variables used to illustrate the concepts of fairness, trust, and established norms constituting social capital in a school network. We intended to reveal the complexity of relation and to generate an overall path model that captures the direct as well as indirect effects of bullying on the three school environment variables through a social capital perspective.

#### 1.2.1. Bullying and school support

The interaction of bullying and key factors in the relationships aspect of social capital including students' social support (i.e., student's perception of school and family support) was reported to have a significant effect on victims' suicidal ideation (Rigby & Slee, 1993). Rigby and Slee (1993) included two consecutive studies that investigated the effect of bullying and the mediating role of students' social support, based on both self-reported and peer-rated responses. Both studies demonstrated a significant mediating effect that social support had on the association between bullying and victims' suicidal ideation. School support was also reported to significantly buffer the effect of bullying victimization on students' mental health problems (Stadler, Feifel, Rohrmann, Vermeiren, & Poustka, 2010). Both bullying perpetrators and victims had a lower level of perceived peer and teacher support compared to bullying bystanders, while the perceived peer and teacher support significantly mitigated the effects of bullying on students' overall life satisfaction (Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009). The findings suggest that the theoretical connection between the amount of social capital available through socially supportive relationships in schools and bullying involvement appear to deserve additional exploration.

#### 1.2.2. Bullying and acceptance of diversity

Acceptance of diversity is one demonstration of intergroup levels of perceived fairness and acceptance at school. The relation between bullying and acceptance of diversity was untangled through a study based on a sample of 3147 students who identified as bullying perpetrators or victims from grades 5 through 12 (Langdon & Preble, 2008). Both acceptance from peers and acceptance from adults in school were significantly correlated with bullying behaviors, and the two types of acceptance together predicted 16.5% variance in bullying frequencies that students experienced (Langdon & Preble, 2008). While acceptance of others in general is related to bullying, bias-based motives elevate the risk of bullying and harassing behaviors (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koening, 2012). The connections between bullying and acceptance of diversity therefore provide an opportunity to evaluate how intergroup attitudes influence the student judgments of others related to bullying.

#### 1.2.3. Bullying and school connectedness

Sense of school connectedness has been regularly noted as a protective factor that can mitigate negative outcomes of bullying (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Students with lower sense of school connectedness are more likely to engage in bullying perpetrating or to be victimized (Glew et al., 2005). Likewise, bullying perpetrating or victimization can influence students' sense of school connectedness. Using a sample of 975 students from grades 7 through 12 in Australia, Skues, Cunningham, and Pokharel (2012) studied the influence of bullying actions on

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