



A synthesis of person- and relational-level factors that influence bullying and bystanding behaviors: Toward an integrative framework



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ABSTRACT

In this article, we attempt to integrate several theoretical models with the goal of explicating more broadly the determinants of bullying and bystanding behaviors. In particular, participant role perspectives (e.g., models in which bullying is conceptualized in the context of multiple participants) serve as an overarching frame for examining and formulating hypotheses about two additional types of determinants: (a) child attributes—specifically, the role of children’s person-related development (i.e., social-cognitive, emotion, and moral processing), and (b) children’s experience with multiple socializing agents (i.e., peers and teachers). Empirical evidence is reviewed to identify relevant constructs, and critical analyses of evidence within and across conceptual domains are utilized to formulate novel hypotheses about how person- and relational-level (socialization) processes may contribute to individual differences in bullying and bystanding behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, research on bullying has proliferated, and the school context (e.g., classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, cafeterias, lavatories) has been the principal place where researchers have studied this phenomenon. It is now clear that bullying (e.g., repeated aggressive behavior aimed at intentionally harming an individual who is weaker or in a more vulnerable social position than the perpetrator) is an international problem that crosses gender, socioeconomic, cultural and racial lines (see Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010). Central to this body of research is the question of what factors encourage, contribute to, and sustain bullying behavior in school contexts. Moreover, because it has been argued that bullying is a group phenomenon that, in addition to bullies and their victims, involves bystanders who take active participant roles in bullying (e.g., reinforcing or assisting bullies; defending victims; see Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), researchers have also expanded their research to examine factors that influence bystanders' behavior.

Investigators have worked from a diversity of theoretical assumptions, frameworks and premises to advance our understanding of the bullying phenomenon (e.g., see Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Salmivalli, 2010; Schwartz, Kelly, Duong, & Badaly, 2010; Veenstra et al., 2007). Collectively, this large, and growing, body of research has provided valuable insight into the nature of bullying and bystanding behaviors, including the individual characteristics and social motivations of the participants, as well as how social context factors contribute to, and sustain, bullying behavior. However, because investigators tend to examine these premises independently rather than jointly, it is less clear how multiple variables, operating conjointly, interact with one another to influence bullying and bystanding behaviors.

Accordingly, our goal for this article is to review what is known about the factors contributing to bullying and bystanding behavior in school contexts, and begin to synthesize findings in ways that offer promising avenues for extending research in novel directions. Although, individually, theoretical perspectives provide unique insights, we posit that the integration of premises and constructs across perspectives would provide for a more systematic and nuanced understanding of the multifaceted causes of bullying and bystanding behaviors. Thus, it is our hope that this synthesis will not only extend investigative agendas, but also encourage greater integration of the theoretical perspectives that drive research in this area.

1.1. Overview of synthesis

Consistent with the conceptualization of bullying as a group process (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000b), this article is grounded in a participant role perspective (Salmivalli et al., 1996). The central proposition of this perspective is that bullying and bystanding behaviors can be construed as a function of the larger social context in which they occur. In other words, it is argued that the extent to which bullying arises and is sustained is dependent not only upon the involvement of bullies and their victims, but also the behavioral responses of those who witness it (i.e., bystanders; see Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli et al., 1996). For example, some participant roles (i.e., assistants and reinforcers) are characterized by pro-bullying bystanding behaviors such as joining in, applauding, or enticing bullying. In contrast, other participant roles (i.e., defenders) may be regarded as demonstrating anti-

bullying behaviors which are aimed at supporting or defending victims and discouraging bullying. Thus, throughout this synthesis, we examine how each of the determinants reviewed may differentiate among pro-bullying and anti-bullying bystanding behaviors and roles.

To organize this large and diverse literature on the factors that contribute to bullying and bystanding behaviors, we utilize a child (person) and environment (relational) framework (see Kochenderfer-Ladd, Ladd, & Kochel, 2009 for similar treatment of risk factors for peer victimization). To identify person-level factors that contribute to bullying and bystanding behaviors, we draw from social cognitive theories broadly, and social information processing (SIP) models in particular. According to SIP models (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000), it is postulated that three forms of processing operate conjointly within the individual (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and moral) to organize and guide social behavior. Consistent with these perspectives, we examine research on each of these types of processes as a means of identifying person-level factors that may be implicated in bullying and bystanding behaviors. At the *relational* (environment) level, we consider children's experience with multiple socializing agents (i.e., peers and teachers) that may account for individual differences in bullying and bystanding behaviors.

Using this person and relational framework, the remaining sections of this article are used to: (1) identify and critically analyze within person and relational factors (processes) that may underlie individual differences in bullying and bystanding behaviors, and (2) propose promising avenues for integrating perspectives on bullying and bystanding behaviors by generating hypotheses about potential causal pathways among the identified processes.

1.1.1. Overview of person-level factors

At the person level, models that attempt to explain how children's social-cognitive development impacts their behavioral decisions are relevant to research on bullying and bystanding behaviors. For example, social information processing (SIP) perspectives (Crick & Dodge, 1994) have been used to generate hypotheses regarding how children's aggressive behavior may stem from poor information processing at various 'steps' in the decision process (i.e., cognitive processing). More recently, reformulations of the SIP framework have been proposed which more explicitly integrate children's emotion and moral processing with social cognitive processes (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000). Applying this reformulated SIP perspective to the study of bullying allows for a more complex and nuanced set of hypotheses to be tested. Specifically, the reformulated SIP model theoretically argues that collective variations in children's social cognitive (e.g., social goals, interpretations of social interactions and outcome expectations), emotion (e.g., emotion understanding, affective ties between children, and empathy), and moral (e.g., moral knowledge, reasoning, and disengagement) processing interact in ways that organize and motivate children's behavior. Extending this logic, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the likelihood that children engage in specific bullying or bystanding behaviors would depend on person-level factors in these three domains. Thus, in this paper, relevant frameworks, premises, and findings from SIP perspectives which include social cognition, emotion and moral development perspectives are reviewed.

Although important insights have been achieved by investigating each of these developmental processes individually, by examining the interactions and functioning of multiple domains simultaneously, new hypotheses can be formed to better understand how these interrelated

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