



# Examining the link between forms of bullying behaviors and perceptions of safety and belonging among secondary school students



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## ABSTRACT

Research suggests that students who bully may perceive the school climate less favorably. Person-centered analyses were used to identify distinct groupings of bullying behaviors and related social–emotional factors (i.e., victimization, internalizing, and perception of school and bullying climate). Latent class analyses were conducted on a sample of 10,254 middle and 2509 high school students and indicated four classes in middle school (Low Involvement, Verbal, High Physical/High Verbal, and High Involvement) and three classes in high school (Low Involvement, Verbal, and High Involvement). A Low Involvement bullying class characterized most students and was related to positive adjustment, whereas a High Involvement bullying class represented the smallest proportion of the sample (1.6% middle school and 7.3% in high school). Students in the High Involvement class reported increased victimization and internalizing problems, feeling less safe and less belonging, and perceiving the school climate to be more supportive of bullying (i.e., perceiving adults' prevention and intervention efforts as ineffective). In middle school, the High Physical/High Verbal class reported significantly higher levels of victimization as compared to the Verbal class. Findings highlight heterogeneity in bullying behaviors and underscore the importance of prevention and intervention programming that addresses safety and belonging.

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## 1. Introduction

Research suggests that students who perceive their school as unsafe and unsupportive are more likely to engage in bullying behaviors (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009); this pattern in turn may contribute to a "climate or culture of bullying" (Bradshaw & Waasdorp, 2009; Unnever & Cornell, 2003). Yet there has been limited research on the distinct forms of bullying (e.g., physical aggression, verbal aggression, relational aggression, see Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008 for discussion of the forms) and in relation to aspects of school climate, such as safety and belongingness. The present study examined distinct patterns in the use of a variety of bullying behaviors (physically aggressing, verbally aggressing, relationally aggressing, cyber bullying, stealing, and making sexual comments) and social–emotional factors (victimization, internalizing problems) in relation to two core aspects of school climate (safety and belonging) and bullying climate via person-centered analyses. We explored potential differences in the patterns of bullying perpetration among middle school and high school students, respectively, as prior

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research suggests there would be developmental differences between the bullying behaviors of these two age groups (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). The current research may inform prevention and intervention programs: for example, by identifying potential social–emotional problems (e.g., internalizing problems, victimization, and social difficulties) of children who bully that could be addressed through tiered preventive interventions (Ross & Horner, 2009). We also aimed to enhance understanding of intra-individual differences in the forms of bullying and social–emotional factors, which are critical for enhancing indicated interventions.

### 1.1. Social–emotional attributes of children who bully

A substantive body of research has identified social–emotional problems common among children who bully (for reviews see Carney & Merrell, 2001; Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Juvonen & Graham, 2001; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). For instance, youth who lack empathy (Endresen & Olweus, 2001), exhibit callous and unemotional traits (Viding, Simmonds, Petrides, & Frederickson, 2009), or are exposed to violence (Baldry, 2003) are more likely to bully. Likewise, aggressive youth tend to have aggressive cognitions, attitudes, and beliefs; perceive aggression as an acceptable and effective response to perceived threats (e.g., support aggressive retaliation; O'Brennan, Bradshaw, & Sawyer, 2009); selectively attend to aggressive cues; and discount situational factors that may have influenced the other person's behavior (for reviews, see Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004a; Sullivan, Farrell, Bettencourt, & Helms, 2008). Taken together, these hostile attribution biases shade students' interpretations of ambiguous situations, such that they infer greater hostility in others' behavior. These aggressive attitudes may also relate to reactive aggression (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997) and problems with behavior regulation (Goldweber, Bradshaw, Goodman, Monahan, & Cooley-Strickland, 2011).

The bully/victim continuum – bullying others, being bullied, both bullying others and being bullied (i.e., bully/victim), and having low to no involvement in bullying – is a useful framework for describing the multiple roles that youth may play in bullying (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & Sawyer, 2008; Nansel et al., 2001; O'Brennan et al., 2009; Swearer et al., 2010; Tobin, Schwartz, Gorman, & Abou-ezzeddine, 2005). Although these roles can vary across context and time (Swearer, Wang, Maag, Siebecker, & Frerichs, 2012), research generally suggests that the bully/victim and bully subtypes evidence the most serious types of behavioral and mental health problems (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Nansel et al., 2001; O'Brennan et al., 2009; Swearer et al., 2010; Tobin et al., 2005). Related research indicates that negatively biased attributional styles may also mediate the link between verbal victimization and depressive symptoms, which can lead to hopelessness, anxiety involving schools and social situations, and other adaptive problems for students (Gibb & Alloy, 2006).

Yet, understanding heterogeneity among children who bully is complex given the paradoxical nature of bullying groupings. In line with a social deficit model of bullying, some researchers characterize children who bully as deficient in social problem-solving (Warden & MacKinnon, 2003). Alternatively, other children who bully are characterized by high social intelligence (Kaukiainen et al., 1999) – which enables them to manipulate peers (Garandeau & Cillessen, 2006) – or power, influence, and popularity (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006; Thunfors & Cornell, 2008). For example, in spite of, or perhaps because of, relational aggression, some children who bully are afforded popularity in adolescence (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010; Rodkin et al., 2006) and are perceived by their peers as leaders (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003).

Regardless of the social functioning of children who bully, these social–emotional factors do not develop in a vacuum. Instead, the social–emotional attributes of children who bully are shaped at least in part by the child's perceptions and the broader social context in which the bullying occurs. As such, a social–ecological perspective allows for a more holistic approach to understanding factors contributing to bullying (Swearer et al., 2010).

### 1.2. Perception of safety, belonging, and bullying climate

Research suggests that aggressive youth perceive their environment and peer interactions differently than other youth (Bradshaw & Garbarino, 2004b; Dodge & Pettit, 2003). School climate is a multidimensional construct consisting of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape student–student and student–teacher dynamics and set the tone for behaviors that are acceptable and normative (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997). Student-level factors such as sex and race have been linked to perceptions of school climate such that boys and minority students perceive poorer school environments (Griffith, 2000). In particular, research has demonstrated that boys were more likely than girls to exhibit disruptive behavior at school (Putallaz & Bierman, 2004) and thus perceived their environment as less safe. The present study focused on two core aspects of school climate: students' perceptions of safety and belonging in their schools (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997; Wilson, 2004). Since the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, school safety has become a target for school-based interventions. A sense of belonging is also a critical facet of school climate; students with a sense of belonging exhibit greater acceptance of authority and behavior regulation in the classroom (Osterman, 2000).

Conversely, feeling unsafe and as though one does not belong at one's school has been associated with deleterious outcomes (Wilson, 2004). Specifically, disorganized, high-conflict schools can exacerbate externalizing problem behaviors and co-occurring school-related problems, such as academic achievement and truancy (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Longitudinal research on school climate by Kasen, Berenson, Cohen, and Johnson (2004), indicated that students (ages 6–16) attending high conflict schools (e.g., student–student and teacher–student conflict) evinced greater increases in externalizing problems (Kasen et al., 2004), and 6 years later, they were at increased risk of alcohol abuse and criminality (Kasen, Cohen, & Brook, 1998).

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