



Level and change of bullying behavior during high school: A multilevel growth curve analysis



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A B S T R A C T

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The development of bullying behavior was examined across three years in a sample of 515 adolescents (46% females) from 41 classrooms. At time 1, the students were in grades 9 and 10 (mean age = 14.5 years; SD = .54). Results of a multilevel growth model showed that both baseline level and change of bullying varied significantly across individuals as well as across classrooms. At the individual level, gender, aggression and competition for social dominance were related with baseline level of bullying. Competition for social dominance and class change were additionally associated with increases in bullying over time. At the classroom level, pro-bullying behaviors were associated with higher baseline level of bullying, whereas anti-bullying behaviors with decreases in bullying over time. Finally, a cross-level interaction underlined that the link between aggression and bullying was moderated by the pro-bullying behaviors within each class. Results are discussed according to the child by environment perspective.

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Introduction

School bullying is a complex behavior usually influenced by multiple individual as well as social factors: it is defined as a subtype of aggressive behavior, in which an individual or a group of individuals repeatedly attacks, humiliates, and/or excludes a relatively powerless person (Olweus, 1993). Although it has been a frequent topic in literature, its development across time has not yet received the attention it deserves, especially in relation to possible individual and social predictors and their interaction. Although very few studies used longitudinal data to analyze bullying growth across time and their predictors at an individual level (Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008; Long & Pellegrini, 2003; Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008), it is not known whether changes in behavior vary between classrooms and which classroom characteristics might contribute to such variation. Through the child by environment perspective, the present study was designed to address these gaps in the literature by investigating changes in bullying behavior during high school both at the individual and classroom levels.

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The development of bullying across time

The development of bullying across time has been mainly studied through cross-sectional data of different cohorts (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Langdon & Preble, 2008; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993; Solberg & Olweus, 2003) and short-term longitudinal studies (Kim, Leventhal, Koh, Hubbard, & Boyce, 2006; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Despite a relatively high stability of bullying involvement (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Henttonen, 1999; Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000), studies indicate that bullying tends to increase during childhood, peak during early adolescence (6th–8th grade; Nansel et al., 2001) or middle adolescence (9th–10th grade; Langdon & Preble, 2008; Marsh, Parada, Craven, & Finger, 2004), and decline slightly during late adolescence (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011).

Most studies examining the development of bullying behavior analyzed mean differences, correlations, or percentages of stability of bullying roles (e.g., Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Sourander et al., 2000). To our knowledge only three studies used a methodological approach able to capture the longitudinal trend of bullying as well as inter-individual differences in this change over time (Barker et al., 2008; Long & Pellegrini, 2003; Pepler et al., 2008). Long and Pellegrini (2003) showed, using growth models, a decreasing trend of bullying behavior from grade 6 to 8 after the transition from primary to middle school (bullying was measured by a single item question). Pepler et al. (2008) found four trajectories of bullying from 10 to 17 years (bullying was measured by two items reporting the frequency and severity of bullying others in the last 5 days and in the last 2 months). Specifically the four trajectories were the high-bullying group, where adolescents are involved consistently in high levels of bullying from 10 to 17 years (9.9%), the desisting group – they started with moderate levels of bullying in early adolescence but desisted to almost no bullying by the end of high school (13.4%), the moderate group which reported consistently moderate levels of bullying over time with an increase through childhood and early adolescence until 14–15 years (35.1%), and the never bullying group which included adolescents who almost never reported bullying (41.6%). Barker et al. (2008) found a mean decrease in bullying – measured by a self-report multiple-items scale referring to the past year – from 14 to 16 years, and further identified two trajectories: 84% of the adolescents followed a low/decreasing trajectory whereas 16% followed a high/increasing trajectory.

Overall, studies on the development of bullying showed that although an average trend of increase until early/middle adolescence is reported by cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, a considerable heterogeneity characterizes the developmental trajectories of bullying. The present study, according to the child by environment approach, aims to analyze whether individual and contextual factors contribute to this variation. The child by environment approach (Ladd, 2003) is a moderator model because it posits that individual characteristics can affect a specific behavior upon the presence of environmental risk factors: thus it is the interaction between the two risk factors, and not only their unique effect, to be responsible for the emergence and the maintenance of that behavior. This approach is particularly relevant to study bullying across time given that literature stresses the interplay between individual and contextual predictors to explain this behavior.

Individual-level predictors of bullying

Several individual-level predictors of bullying have received attention in literature (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). In the present study we will focus on gender and on the two main individual predictors which are part of the definition of bullying: trait aggression and social status.

Gender differences are commonly reported in bullying behavior: boys engage more in bullying than girls do (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Olweus, 1993). Longitudinal studies identifying developmental trajectories have shown that although the shapes of the trajectories are similar across sexes (Long & Pellegrini, 2003), girls are underrepresented in the high- and moderate-bullying trajectory groups (Barker et al., 2008; Pepler et al., 2008).

Trait aggression is associated with bullying behavior both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Bullies are frequently described with a profile of aggressive and externalizing problems, such as conduct problems and proactive aggression (e.g. Menesini, Modena, & Tani, 2009; Olweus, 1978; Solberg & Olweus, 2003; White & Loeber, 2008). Although static predictions have been empirically supported by several studies, we might ask whether trait aggression also predicts the change of the bullying trajectory using a more dynamic approach: in particular we can hypothesize a steeper increase over time or a decelerated decrease over time for those adolescents with higher levels of aggression at the beginning of the trajectory.

Social dominance is a relational variable that orders individuals in a hierarchy according to their access to resources (Pellegrini, 2002). Individuals compete with each other using both aggressive and affiliative strategies to gain status: bullying is viewed as an agonistic strategy used to obtain and maintain social dominance because individuals who get the better of their peers are often leaders of the peer group (Pellegrini & Long, 2003): in line with this view bullying seems to increase during the initial stages of group formation, because aggression and agonistic strategies, such as bullying, tend to be used in the service of establishing the dominance hierarchies (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001; Strayer & Noel, 1986). Studies have shown that attitudes toward interpersonal relationships centered on a social competition aimed to be superior to others are associated with being seen as aggressive (Tassi & Schneider, 1997), as well as with pro-bullying attitudes and bullying behavior (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). The longitudinal study by Long and Pellegrini (2003) showed that changes in bullying are associated with similar changes in dominance, supporting that bullying is a strategy used to gain dominance. We might ask whether competing for social dominance can be a distal individual-level predictor of the bullying trajectory across high school.

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