

The Psychological Mechanisms of Perpetrators in School Bullying

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Abstract. School bullying is still a global challenge in educational systems, current interventions pay much efforts that focus on supporting victims but neglecting the root causes that form perpetrators. This essay fixes this gap by introducing a Moral Ecology Interaction Model which argues that bullying behavior emerges not from personal traits or school environments alone, but from the interactions between specific psychological predispositions and the moral-ecological conditions of the school. By reviewing contemporary research in psychology and sociology, the essay systematically analyzes three perpetrator profiles (the cold ringleader, the reactive defender, and the conforming follower). Each profile interacts with specific features of the school's moral ecology to co-construct different pathways that lead to aggressive behavior. The essay then identifies environmental catalysts, including the hidden curriculum, bystander reinforcement dynamics, and institutional discipline, which all function to lower the social costs of bullying. Based on this interactionist framework, this essay suggests targeted intervention for different types of perpetrators, and at the same time brings out systematic changes aimed at transforming the school atmosphere, including positive bystander training, consistent disciplinary responses, and fostering prosocial norms through extracurricular structures.

1 Introduction

School bullying is a serious and intractable problem for education systems across the world. Its' consequences can not only impact the victims but also the small social community in school in varying degrees. While a considerable amount of attention and efforts had already been received by the victims (e.g., psychological counseling rooms and punishment rules inside schools), there is still a lack of measures that directly focus on perpetrators. In modern society, schools and relevant educational institutions often have the inertial thinking of downplaying and glossing over school bullying issues, and there is still a vague legal definition for bullying behaviors especially verbal bullying. When this system-level defect combines with the defect in cultural concepts, which is the insufficient understanding of "psychological violence" among parents and teachers, it leads to the outcome that effective prevention remains elusive. In order to keep the current anti-bullying programme processing, analysis that focuses on its origins must be made.

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Current psychological research has made significant progress in identifying the two primary sets of contributing factors for bullying behavior. On one hand, the individual dispositional traits such as callous-unemotionality and deficits in empathy have been discovered. On the other hand, powerful environmental triggers like informal social control from peer groups that reward and motivate aggression, bystander dynamics that provide a wrong atmosphere of approval, and the school's hidden curriculum that indirectly permits harassment. In terms of this, there is still a lack of an integrative framework that explains how an individual's psychological predisposition and the moral ecological school environment interact to produce the specific cognitive and affective mechanisms of bullying behaviors.

This essay will introduce a Moral Ecology Interaction Model. By arguing that the behavior of a school bully is not universal, but a changeable trait that depends on the personal psychological predispositions and the environment of the school.

2 Psychological predispositions

Building on the Moral Ecology Interaction Model, since bullying behavior is formed from the interplay between personal traits and environmental factors, this section will focus on the specific psychological predispositions that underlie a perpetrator's actions. These predispositions are raw material that increases the chance of a student adopting aggressive behaviors when activated by the school's moral ecology. By investigating them, how inherent psychological factors lead certain students to bullying can be better understood, and it can set the foundation for further analysis of how these traits interact with the school environment.

2.1 Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits as a foundation of instrumental aggression

According to the American Psychiatric Association, Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits refer to a set of behaviors that reflect a lack of prosocial emotions [1]. Contemporary research continues to affirm that these traits can be used to describe children or adolescents who show a set of serious, aggressive antisocial behavior, particularly a lack of affective empathy, guilt and deficient affect [2]. These traits directly linked to proactive aggression. The process of making moral decisions is smooth for individuals with CU traits due to the lack of empathy and guilt, while the shallow affect allows them to think calmly and deliberatively. They both actuate the perpetrators to conduct bullying behaviors more directly without struggling; the aggressive behavior is not caused by sudden impulsion or rage, but as a premeditated tool for them to achieve their goal (e.g., gaining power, status, sense of achievement, self-esteem).

It is worth noting that even though adolescents with high levels of CU traits can be identified by profound affective attachment, meaning that they will not feel guilty when harming others [3]. Although this does not necessarily mean they cannot understand, neurobiological and psychological researchers have found that while high-CU individuals have difficulty in affective empathy (feeling others' emotions), their cognitive empathy (the understanding of others' thoughts) ability can actually remain unchanged or even higher than that of a normal individual [4,5]. This means that through cognitive empathy, they can identify and make use of the victim's vulnerabilities to make their bullying behavior damage to the victims' mental health in the long term.

Therefore, it can be concluded that CU traits have the function of urging an individual to become a cold-blooded, rational perpetrator, but how these traits are shown through each individual and the degree of severity vary with the environment.

2.2 Narcissistic vulnerability & social dominance as the drivers of ego-defensive aggression

The second major psychological predisposition is vulnerable narcissism, including several traits like covert entitlement paired with shame, hypersensitivity, and social withdrawal [6]. It is fundamentally different from CU traits and represents a distinct psychological pathway to bullying as a form of emotion regulation or self-defense. According to Bushman and Baumeister, "threatened egotism" was used to illustrate that aggressive behavior is driven by fragile self-esteem, which has been threatened, and this self-esteem is created by narcissistic vulnerability [7]. When this ego is threatened, individuals will therefore experience an "injury" to their narcissism (feeling of shame), which can then trigger a set of aggressive and defensive behaviors aimed at shaping self-identity or realizing self-value.

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), on the other hand, is a key psychological predisposition that interacts explosively with the school environments that have clear social stratification. It is a measurable personality variable, which refers to a preference toward group hierarchy and social inequality [8]. It is seen as a core driver of intergroup attitudes and behaviors in the modern concept [9]. Therefore, SDO can lead to proactive aggression; high-SDO individuals tend to think the world is competitive, and their primary goal is to control others, so bullying is like a tool for them to "teach someone a lesson", a way to clarify the boundaries between "us" and "them".

Individuals with these two psychological predispositions rely heavily on specific moral disengagement mechanisms. For narcissistic individuals, to minimize the potential guilt from engaging in aggressive behavior, they strongly rely on the mechanism of attribution of blame. They say things like "they started it" or "they deserved it" to convince themselves, transform their bullying behavior into an act of self-defense to protect their fragile inner selves from further injury. For high-SDO individuals, their aggressive behavior is often morally justified, being facilitated by dehumanization. For those individuals, "they"(out-group) are viewed as less important compared with "us"(in-group), which makes their bullying seem not only reasonable but natural.

2.3 The conformist profile: the psychology of the follower

While CU traits and narcissistic vulnerability illustrate the psychology of the perpetrators, the bullying process also relies on the participation of others. This participation is usually driven by the desire to "fit in" and the demand for belonging; it is not defined by aggression, but by a fear of exclusion and a need for social relations. This profile is essential for analysing the "henchmen" and passive reinforcers, which their primary goal and motivation is not harm or gain entertainment or achieve respects, but to socially "survive" in the peer group. This is particularly profound and suitable among adolescents, as peer groups provide informal social control to every individual through peer pressure. To sum up, while these predispositions have a profound impact on individuals, they are not deterministic. Generating actual bullying behavior still requires a catalyst from the school's moral ecology.

3 School as a moral ecology environment

After discussing the key psychological predispositions that may cause an individual to bully, it is essential to consider the school environment next. The school functions not only as an educational institution but also as a moral ecology, providing both formal and informal social control and secondary socialization that reinforces norms and values. Within this system, factors such as the hidden curriculum, bystander dynamics, and institutional hierarchies act as a catalyst that transforms potential traits into actual behavior. This section discusses how

a school's moral environment and personal psychology interact and influence the formation of a student into a perpetrator, thus completing the interactional perspective mentioned in the introduction of this essay.

3.1 The influence of hidden curriculum and peer groups

The hidden curriculum applied by peers and teachers constantly makes micro, low-level aggression go unnoticed and become normal, creating an environment where bullying is socially learned and rewarded. The informal, unspoken regulations, beyond the formal written rules for students in school, include implicit lessons about status, power, and behavior that students receive through daily practices [10]. The hidden curriculum is most potently enacted within the micro-social ecosystems of peer groups. As established, adolescents' desire for a sense of belonging promotes the formation of different peer groups, each of which cultivates a culture, a set of norms, and communication standards that belong to them, all of which enhance the sense of group identity [11,12]. In a deviant peer group, this internal culture can normalize a series of aggressive behaviors, such as exclusion, implicit ridicule, or "casual" physical provocation. These acts constitute a socialization process into a bullying ethos, operating below the threshold of typical adult intervention. Crucially, this phenomenon highlights a critical gap in the public's understanding of bullying. While news and social media are dedicated to exaggerating bullying behavior, bullying in real life is actually reflected in micro-aggressive socialization within peer networks. This "drip-drip" exposure, often minimized as "teasing" or "conflict," is actually toxic, and peer interactions can inflict cumulative psychological harm. Consequently, for a student predisposed to dominance, this peer-level hidden curriculum does not merely permit bullying; it provides a continuous way for establishing social hierarchy through subtle aggression, thereby clarifying group boundaries and reinforcing status.

3.2 Bystander audience-the active reinforcers

Bystanders, through their collective reaction and misinterpretation of social situations, become active reinforcers of bullying by sending signals of approval and inaction, reducing the social costs of aggression perpetrators received. The bystander effect is not merely apathy but a structured psychological process that actively removes intervention. Bystanders collectively misunderstand bullying behavior as not serious because everyone observes the cues of others. Modern studies focused on schools find that this inaction is alleviated by the school atmosphere and students' levels of empathy, which can restrict or motivate intervention [13]. This ambiguous social definition makes the diffusion of responsibility possible, and the coexistence of others reduces the responsibility that individuals need to take. Therefore, a cycle is formed, diffusion of responsibility encourages inaction, which is understood as no action needs to be taken. The silence of peer groups becomes a powerful default in the moral ecosystem, sending a signal to the perpetrators that their bullying behavior is socially permitted.

Critically, the result of the bystander effect, collective inaction, is a social signal for the perpetrators to interpret. They might interpret the evasive looks from their friends as silent consent rather than uncertainty. This will become an active source of social rewards, reinforcing aggression by verifying social dominance. For adolescents with SDO, this silent consensus confirms that their enforcement of the hierarchy is accepted. For a narcissistic, vulnerable individual, this means that their bullying behavior has successfully maintained their status. Therefore, the peer ecosystem not only fails to reduce the existence of bullying behavior but actually reinforces it by making this behavior seem to have low risk with high reward.

3.3 The architecture of power

The moral ecology of a school is defined by social stratification and often reinforced by formal and informal systems. These systems evaluate and categorize students by stratifying based on score, labeling based on performance, and implicit biases from teachers, etc., and lead to the formation of a culture of stereotyping that distinguishes a clear boundary between "high-achieving" and "underperforming" groups. This systematic stratification identifies a potential target among students and fosters an environment where stereotype-based hierarchy becomes acceptable. The emergence of this structure may have been without malice, but it may arise from well but narrow educational frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes like improvement in academic performance over social cohesion. As a result, the school's moral environment potentially normalizes exclusion and lowers the social/emotional costs of bullying.

However, this structure is inherently inert. Prohibited or permitted aggressive behaviors are conveyed through the actions of teachers and principals. Teachers' indifference, inconsistent discipline, or perceived unfairness are not merely management failures but powerful signals. They lead students to believe that protecting those who are vulnerable is not a priority. This erodes trust in teachers and the school's regulatory systems, while simultaneously reducing the social costs associated with bullying [14]. When the authoritative systems exhibit contradictions, the implicit message is that the peer-sanctioned school bullying will incur minimal consequences, thereby completing a permissive moral environment in which predispositions can translate into actions with impunity.

4 Co-constructing the perpetrator's bullying behavior

The preceding analysis has established two basic components: the psychological predispositions within the individual and the moral ecology of the school environment. However, neither of them is determinative alone. This essay argues that predispositions provide the motivation for aggressive behavior, while the moral ecology provides the catalyst (the social scripts, audiences, and reinforcement schedules) that shape this motivation further into specific behavior. The following analysis illustrates three primary interaction pathways, explaining how specific predispositions are directed by specific school atmosphere to produce the ringleader, the defender, and the follower.

4.1 Pathway 1: the proactive ringleader

This pathway is achieved through the interaction between CU characteristics and the highly competitive and stratified school ecosystem. A student with high CU traits, characterized by a profound lack of guilt and affective empathy, encounters a school environment where social status is connected to dominance and power, such as a culture that enforces rigid social class. This ecology does not create the predisposition but activates and channels it, providing a clear behavioral model. Individual cognitive empathy is strategically used as a weapon to identify the best targets, usually those who have been marginalized by the school's social hierarchy, to manipulate peer dynamics. Their aggression is instrumental, not emotional; bullying is being used as a low-effort, high-profit tool for social control. This interaction shapes a perpetrator who relies on proactive moral disengagement, making them think in mainly two ways: dehumanization and moral justification. Therefore, the cold and calculating ringleader does not appear simply because of callous-unemotional (CU) traits. This profile emerges specifically from the combination of CU traits with a school environment that actively rewards the aggression that is being used to maintain social place.

4.2 Pathway 2: the reactive defender

The reactive dysregulated pathway is catalysed by the intersection of narcissistic vulnerability and the contexts endemic to school life. A student with this predisposition, including characteristics of fragile self-esteem, sensitive to comments, and afraid of shame, lives in an ecology environment with structured, public places (hallways, cafeteria, and social platforms) where social status is continuously being judged [6]. In these situations, a sarcastic comment, a rejecting look, or a public criticism will not be regarded as an insignificant conflict, but rather as a profound narcissistic hurt [7]. This triggered a strong feeling related to shame and can be transformed into outward anger. The resulting bullying is reactive, impulsive, and retaliatory; its primary function is not to weigh the costs and benefits, but to regulate one's own emotions and boost self-esteem. The ecological stage is therefore integral; adolescents, as a public audience, amplify the humiliation and make the retaliatory behavior necessary for saving face. This interaction co-constructs a perpetrator profile characterized by reactive moral disengagement and reliance on attribution of blame and distorted labeling [15]. Consequently, the impulsive perpetrators emerge from the specific fit between an ego under threat and a school ecology.

4.3 Pathway 3: the conforming follower

The third pathway explains how ordinary adolescents become involved in bullying not as perpetrators, but as followers. This happens from the interaction between a high need for belonging and membership in a peer group with specific group aggressive norms. In schools, peer groups often develop their own rules about how to behave, a potent idoculture, an internal society with shared values and behaviors [11]. If a group's culture involves dominance or sanctions among others, it creates powerful social pressure. For a conformist student who is anxious about fitting in, going against a peer group is risky. For them, the main goal is not to cause harm, but to avoid rejection and maintain their social survival.

Therefore, their participation in bullying, whether through active assistance, laughter, or simply observation, is a way to show loyalty and secure their social position, an act of strategic affiliation. They use excuses like "Everyone is doing it" (responsibility dispersion) or "I'm just carrying out my friend's request" (responsibility transfer) to save their conscience. In this way, the student's role as a bully is not driven by a naturally aggressive personality, but a role created by the social situation, a part they feel they must play to be accepted. This interaction demonstrates how the school's peer-level social environment can turn the common fear of exclusion into active support for bullying.

5 Further recommendations derived from the Moral Ecology Interaction Model

The Moral Ecology Interaction Model shows perpetrators' bullying behavior is not simply a result of "bad" students. Instead, it results from the interaction between a student's psychological predispositions (lack of empathy, strong demand to fit in) and the school's social environment (peer groups, hidden curriculum, and teachers' reaction). This theory reveals two key points. First, a student's role as a bully is often specific to the situation; they might bully in one setting but not another, concluding that the environment is a powerful trigger. Moreover, the social rewards from peers, like gained status sense of belonging, are often stronger motivators than a student's personality.

Therefore, in order to reduce bullying effectively, schools must use strategies that work on both the individual and the environment at the same time. Simply relying on punishing the perpetrators will fail because it ignores the social system that encouraged the behavior.

The first part focuses on tailored help for students: For the ringleader, support systems must focus on perspective-taking to help them understand the real impact of their behavior; For the reactive defender (who bullies after feeling ashamed), support should center on managing anger and building healthier and stronger inner-self; For the follower (who's desire is to fit in), train on how to build confidence and social skills to effectively handle negative peer pressure.

The second and crucial part is to change the school's social environment. Schools need to take concrete steps to make bullying less rewarding and prosocial behavior the norm. Key actions include building positive bystander intervention programs that teach students effective strategies to support victims and interrupt peer aggression, therefore changing students from passive audiences into active defenders. Simultaneously, institutions must enforce fair and consistent disciplinary responses to bullying. When all staff apply clear and predictable consequences, the teacher-student relationship should also be strengthened and send a potent signal that bullying will not be tolerated. Finally, school leadership must be reflective, reviewing systems that may unintentionally contribute to social stratification while fostering inclusive communities through organized activities such as clubs and cooperative projects, and establishing friendly connections among different peer groups.

6 Conclusion

This essay has argued that school bullying is a behaviour shaped by both individual psychology and the school environment. According to the Moral Ecology Interaction Model, three problems were analysed: the lack of complete recognition of bullying, the overlooked differences among perpetrators, and the failure to identify social factors that encourage bullying.

There are three main conclusions. First, perpetrators have three distinct profiles: those with callous-unemotional(CU) traits, those with vulnerable narcissism or social dominance, and those who bully to fit in. Second, these traits do not automatically lead to bullying themselves; they require environmental triggers such as peer group norms, bystander inaction, and inconsistent discipline to interact with them. Third, a student's bullying role is not determined but often situational, which means that changing the environment can reduce harm.

One key insight is that social rewards (status, belonging, and approval) from school often make bullying more than an individual thing. Therefore, punishment alone is insufficient to change the bullying phenomenon if the school ecology still rewards aggression.

Future research can conduct longitudinal studies to track how these factors interact over time. It will be valuable to make cross-cultural comparisons and intervention studies in order to test the practical effectiveness of different approaches. This model focuses on understanding the conditions that motivate bullying behavior and how to change them.

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