

Unmasking the Aggressor: Understanding the Bullying Perpetrator**Himalaya Putra Bhattacharya* Dr. Meenakshi Singh****

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.com**ABSTRACT**

This review paper aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the individuals who play the role of perpetrators in bullying cases. It delves into the complex interconnection among the factors that contribute to the perpetration, involving the individual attributes like – impulsive nature, lack of empathy, narcissistic attributes, etc.; family dynamics like – being harsh towards children, exposure to family related violence, etc.; influence of peers on each other like - social learning (observational), peer pressure, etc.; other than that, climate of school, and broader media and influence by the cultures. Various theoretical frameworks are also considered, including Theory of Social Learning, Moral Disengagement Theory, General Strain Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Online Disinhibition Effect, which explains the progress and continuation of aggressive or bullying behavior. The paper also takes into account the factors that motivate one to bully, like thirst for power, coping with the situation, and lack of knowledge of its harmful impact. The paper also highlights the "bully-victim" phenomenon that mostly leads to negative results. Finally, the paper considers the short-term and long-term consequences for perpetrators themselves, such as antisocial behavior, academic difficulties, and poor interpersonal relationships. Briefly, it touches upon intervention approaches aimed at modifying perpetrator behavior by addressing root causes and fostering prosocial skills.

Introduction: Beyond the Label of "Bully"

This paper aims to move beyond simplistic labels and explore the complex factors that contribute to an individual becoming a perpetrator of bullying. While the act of bullying inflicts significant harm and is unequivocally unacceptable, a deeper understanding of those who engage in such behavior is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. This exploration will examine the characteristics, motivations, environmental influences, and theoretical underpinnings associated with bullying perpetration, as well as the consequences faced by the perpetrators themselves. The aim is to make the education system adopt such an approach that could break the cycle of this form of aggression and lead to a happy and healthy environment in schools (Defriyanto et al., 2024).

Bullying or being a bully can create a lot of hurdles in the development of the lives and personalities of the individuals who are perpetrators. One has to understand that an individual does not become a perpetrator in a single shot. A myriad of factors contribute to it, such as various traits, the dynamics of family, school environment, influence of the peers, exposure to today's media that is full of negative motivation, cultural rules, socio-economic status, academic pressure, etc. (Defriyanto et al., 2024; Brion et al., 2024). Other than that, psychological theories including Social Learning Theory given by Bandura, Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura, as cited in Konnikova, 2015), General Strain Theory of Agnew, Ecological Systems Theory propounded by Bronfenbrenner, and the Online Disinhibition Effect by Suler, provide a strong framework for understanding the growth and maintenance of these behaviors. The existence of "bully-victims" individuals who both perpetrate bullying and are victimized themselves further underscores this complexity, highlighting that some who aggress are also navigating their own experiences of harm (NASEM, 2016). This inherent variety implies that there is no single, universal profile of a "bully." Hence, the perpetration arises from complex interaction of these diverse factors, which tells us that if we follow the same approach to deal with every perpetrator, then it will not work, just as fever is one thing i.e. increase of body temperature, but to treat it, we find its cause that whether it is because of jaundice, dengue, pneumonia, or any viral infection, and we provide medicine as per the real cause. Similarly, to bring change in the behavior of the perpetrator, we need to find the root cause and then apply the treatment.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the complex interplay of individual, familial, peer, institutional, and socio-cultural factors contributing to bullying perpetration.
2. To understand the psychological and emotional motivations that drive individuals to engage in bullying behavior.
3. To analyze the theoretical frameworks that explain the development and persistence of bullying behavior among perpetrators.
4. To explore the phenomenon of bully-victims and the compounded challenges they face.

5. To identify the short-term and long-term consequences of bullying behavior on perpetrators.
6. To recommend intervention strategies that address root causes and promote prosocial development among perpetrators.

Research Questions

1. What are the key individual, family, peer, school, and socio-cultural factors that contribute to bullying perpetration?
2. How do psychological mechanisms such as moral disengagement and emotional dysregulation influence bullying behavior?
3. What roles do theoretical frameworks like Social Learning Theory, General Strain Theory, and Ecological Systems Theory play in explaining perpetrator behavior?
4. Who are bully-victims, and how do their experiences differ from those of pure perpetrators or victims?
5. What are the long-term psychological, social, and academic outcomes faced by individuals who engage in bullying?
6. Which intervention approaches are effective in addressing the behavior of bullying perpetrators and preventing its recurrence?

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative review methodology to synthesize existing literature related to bullying perpetration. A thematic analysis approach has been used to identify and organize patterns across studies focusing on individual traits, family background, peer influence, school environment, and socio-cultural context. The review draws upon empirical studies, theoretical models, and systematic reviews published in peer-reviewed journals. The insights are critically analysed to construct a holistic understanding of the bullying perpetrator and to highlight implications for intervention. The methodology avoids statistical meta-analysis and instead focuses on interpretative synthesis grounded in conceptual frameworks.

The Making of a Perpetrator: Contributing Factors and Influences

No child is born a bully. Perpetrating behavior often emerges from a confluence of individual predispositions and a wide array of environmental factors that span the various domains of a young person's life—their home, school, peer group, and the wider societal and cultural context. Understanding these multifaceted influences is key to comprehending how such behavior takes root.

Individual Characteristics and Psychological Traits: Certain individual characteristics and psychological traits have been associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in bullying behavior. Perpetrators may exhibit impulsivity and difficulties with emotional regulation, struggling to manage their feelings constructively. The link between low self-esteem and perpetration is sometimes debated in research, but it is cited as a potential factor (Shekhawat & Mishra, 2024). More consistently, those who bully often display traits such as narcissism, a lack of empathy for others, and a degree of skill in relational manipulation, using social dynamics to their advantage (Malhi et al., 2014). Difficulties in emotion regulation can act as both a precursor to aggressive behavior and a consequence of involvement in peer victimization cycles, potentially mediating the link to adverse outcomes like aggression. At the same time, there is no single "bullying gene." Some genetic predispositions may influence how individuals respond to adversity or their propensity for aggression, interacting with environmental factors (NASEM, 2016).

The Role of Family Dynamics and Home Environment: The family environment plays a critical role in shaping a child's social and emotional development, and certain dynamics can increase the risk of perpetrating bullying. Harsh, punitive, or neglectful parenting styles, coupled with poor parental involvement and inconsistent discipline, have been linked to higher levels of aggression in children (Barhight et al., 2013; Qiqi et al., 2020). Exposure to violence within the home is a particularly significant risk factor. Children who witness domestic violence or experience maltreatment may internalize aggression as a normative or effective way to solve problems or exert control, subsequently replicating these behaviors in their school interactions (Ingram et al., 2020).

Peer Group Influences and Social Learning: For adolescents, peer groups exert a powerful influence. Peer pressure can drive conformity to group norms, including aggressive behaviors, as individuals seek social acceptance or fear exclusion (Espelage & Holt, 2001). In some peer contexts, bullying may be perceived as a way to gain attention, social power, or enhance social standing (Salmivalli, 2010). Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing and imitating others, particularly if those observed actions are rewarded or go unpunished. If children see peers gaining status or desired outcomes through bullying, they may be more likely to adopt such behaviors themselves. Perpetrators might also offer "temporary social approval" to those who assist or reinforce their bullying actions, further solidifying these group dynamics (Salmivalli, 2010).

School Environment and Climate Factors: The school environment itself can either inhibit or facilitate bullying perpetration. A negative school climate, characterized by weak teacher support, poor supervision in less structured areas (like- playgrounds or hallways), unclear or inconsistently enforced disciplinary policies, and strained peer interactions, is correlated with higher instances of bullying (Wang et al., 2013). When teachers or school staff are perceived as unresponsive or ineffective in addressing bullying, it can send an implicit message to students that such behavior is permissible or will not be adequately addressed, thereby emboldening potential perpetrators (Swearer et al., 2010). A significant gap identified in many educational systems is the lack of adequate pre-service and in-service

teacher training in classroom management, conflict resolution, and specific strategies for handling indiscipline and bullying (UNESCO, 2020; Baker-Henningham, 2018).

Media and Cultural Influences: Exposure to violence and aggression through media, including video games and online content, can contribute to the normalization of such behaviors and potentially fuel bullying, particularly cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014; Parmar et al., 2024). The concept of 'tie strength' on social media platforms also appears relevant; research suggests that increased usage of "weak-tie" platforms (characterized by less intimate and frequent interactions) is associated with a higher likelihood of both perpetrating and experiencing cyberbullying (Ni et al., 2025). Broader cultural norms also play a part. For instance, societal ideals of dominant masculinity may contribute to higher rates of physical bullying among boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), while cultural tolerance of aggression in general can create an environment where bullying is less likely to be challenged. Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory underscores how these larger cultural values interact with more immediate environmental systems to shape behavior.

Socio-Economic Status (SES) and Academic Pressure: Socio-economic factors can also intersect with bullying perpetration. Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may be more vulnerable not only to being victimized but also to perpetrating bullying, possibly due to increased stress, social isolation, or as a maladaptive response to limited opportunities or stigmatization (Thakkar et al., 2025; Tippett & Wolke, 2014). Additionally, intense academic pressure in highly competitive school environments can lead some students to channel their stress and frustration into aggressive behavior towards peers (Putri, 2024).

Theoretical Underpinnings of Perpetrator Behavior:

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977): As mentioned, this theory emphasizes that individuals learn aggressive behaviors through observation and imitation of others (e.g., peers, family members, media figures), especially when these models are perceived as being rewarded or not facing negative consequences for their aggression.

Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura, as cited in Konnikova, 2015): This theory explains how perpetrators can commit harmful acts without significant self-condemnation by employing cognitive strategies to detach from their moral standards. These strategies include blaming the victim ("they deserved it"), minimizing the harm ("it wasn't that bad"), or diffusing responsibility ("everyone else was doing it"). Most of the time, this thing we see in the case of cyberbullying, where the distance from the victim and perpetrator being anonymous leads to such disengagement.

General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992): This theory posits that individuals may engage in deviant behavior, including bullying, when they experience various forms of strain or stress, such as peer rejection, academic failure, or family abuse. Such strain leads to the development of negativity, and the individual in an angry or frustrated mood starts coping

circumstances. Robert Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory posits that experiences of strain—such as academic failure, peer rejection, or domestic abuse—can generate significant stress and negative emotions, including anger, frustration, and humiliation. In the absence of healthy coping skills or adequate support systems, some individuals may resort to bullying as an outlet for these feelings or as an attempt to regain a sense of control (Kalinin et al., 2021). Similarly, intense academic pressure can lead some students to channel their stress into aggressive behavior towards others (Putri, 2024).

Learned Behavior and Justification through Moral Disengagement: As explained by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), individuals may learn that aggression is an effective or acceptable way to achieve their goals if they observe others (peers, family members, media figures) doing so successfully or without negative consequences. Once engaged in such behavior, perpetrators often employ cognitive strategies of moral disengagement to rationalize their actions and reduce feelings of guilt or self-censure. They might blame the victim ("they provoked me" or "they deserved it"), minimize the harm caused ("it was just a joke" or "they weren't really hurt"), diffuse responsibility ("everyone else was doing it"), or dehumanize the victim, making it easier to justify their aggressive acts (Konnikova, 2015). Perpetrators often hold normative beliefs that support aggressive retaliation or the use of aggression to solve conflicts (NASEM, 2016).

Lack of Empathy and Understanding of Impact: A significant factor contributing to bullying behavior is often a deficiency in empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of others (Shekhawat & Mishra, 2024). Perpetrators in their happiness of being powerful, are unable to understand the pain and distress that the victim suffers because of their action, and this lack of empathy is given more flame when the bullying behavior is done online. (Suler, 2004) highlights that the absence of direct, face-to-face emotional cues from the victim in cyberbullying interactions prohibit the perpetrator from understanding how much pain he is giving to the victim, thereby lowering inhibitions against aggressive behavior.

One of the underlying reasons why bullying continues, even though society always condemns it, lies in how bullies manage to silence and unhear the voice of conscience. This process, known as moral disengagement, helps them avoid feelings of guilt or self-blame for their harmful actions, which can even lead to the death of the victim, as we see in newspapers frequently. As Albert Bandura pointed out (cited in Konnikova, 2015), people often use mental tricks like blaming the victim or making themselves believe that the act was not harmful or just a healthy joke. In the context of cyberbullying, for example, offenders may convince themselves that they are simply defending themselves or responding fairly, rather than initiating harm against the one they are chatting with (Konnikova, 2015). Research by NASEM (2016) also found that some individuals justify their behavior based on beliefs that support aggressive revenge. Essentially, these mental justifications allow bullies to keep acting without feeling they're doing anything wrong. If this self-deception weren't in place, many perpetrators of bullying would abstain from repeating such acts because of their inner voice and guilt. That's why it's so important for interventions to focus

not just on punishment, but on helping perpetrators recognize the flawed thinking that allows them to harm others without remorse. Encouraging empathy and breaking down these excuses can help reconnect them with their basic sense of right and wrong. Also, proper counselling is needed for them to make them understand what they are doing.

The Dual Identity: The Bully-Victim Phenomenon

Within the complex dynamics of school bullying, a significant and particularly concerning subset of individuals emerges: those who are not purely perpetrators or victims but who occupy both roles simultaneously or sequentially. These "bully-victims" present a uniquely challenging profile and are often found to be at a heightened risk for a range of negative psychosocial outcomes.

Characteristics and Risks: As mentioned in (NASEM, 2016), Research indicates that individuals who are both bullies and victims (bully-victims) are at the greatest risk for experiencing severe and pervasive negative consequences. They often exhibit a comorbidity of internalizing problems (such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, typically associated with victimization) and externalizing problems (such as aggression, delinquency, and conduct issues, typically associated with perpetration). Bully-victims also tend to have poor social skills, face rejection from their peer group, and are at a significantly heightened risk for suicidal ideation and behavior compared to those who are solely victims, solely perpetrators, or uninvolved. Their engagement in both sides of the bullying dynamic places them in a precarious and often isolated social position.

Possible Pathways: While the specific pathways to becoming a bully-victim can vary, several scenarios are plausible. Some individuals who are initially victimized may subsequently engage in bullying behavior as a form of retaliation against their aggressors or others they perceive as weaker, perhaps in an attempt to regain a sense of power or control that was stripped from them through their own victimization. They might also be modeling the aggressive behaviors they have experienced. Conversely, some individuals who primarily perpetrate bullying may become targets themselves, perhaps because their aggressive behavior alienates peers, provokes retaliation from their victims or others, or makes them vulnerable in different social contexts.

The experience of the bully-victim is one of amplified turmoil. They simultaneously suffer the psychological trauma and distress associated with being a target—such as fear, anxiety, and depression—while also exhibiting the problematic behaviors and facing the negative social and developmental consequences associated with being an aggressor—such as poor peer relationships, conduct problems, and potential long-term antisocial tendencies (NASEM, 2016). This dual role likely creates immense internal conflict, confusion, and a profound lack of stable social footing. They may struggle to form healthy relationships, as their behaviors can be both needy (due to victimization) and aggressive (due to perpetration). This makes their situation uniquely challenging compared to that of "pure" victims or "pure" perpetrators, trapping them in a particularly vicious cycle of aggression and distress that requires highly nuanced and supportive intervention.

The Repercussions of Aggression: Consequences for Perpetrators

While bullying behavior might offer some perpetrators short-term gains, such as a temporary sense of power, peer attention, or social dominance, the long-term consequences are often profoundly negative. These repercussions in the long run create many hurdles or a negative impact on their social development, academic achievement, and future related events like securing a prestigious job or fulfilling family responsibilities.

Short-Term Social Gains (Often Illusory or temporary): In some peer contexts, perpetrators at starting achieve social dominance over others and approval from other peers who accept them due to fear or get entertained by the bullying behavior of the perpetrator towards the victim (Salmivalli, 2010). The perpetrator at first, can receive short-term attention or be called "tough" or "cool" within the group in which he/she spends time (Malhi et al., 2014). But in reality, the building blocks of this "Dabangg" or "macho man" status are fear and threat rather than real respect, like, or love, which makes it a temporary, fake, and useless gain.

Long-Term Negative Outcomes: The long-term consequences for those who persistently bully others are found to be very destructive and can even ruin the lives of the perpetrators. Major ones are:

Antisocial Behavior and Criminality: Many researches show that individuals who get involved in bullying as perpetrators during school days are at a big risk of becoming antisocial persons in adulthood (Halliday et al., 2021). This also includes a higher likelihood of becoming delinquent during adolescence and indulging in criminality later in life (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Such individuals are also involved in campus and hostel ragging at university level.

Academic Disengagement and Failure: Perpetrators of bullying often experience problems in academic development, including disinterest in attending school, failure in examinations, and a high rate of school dropout (Defriyanto et al., 2024). Their disruptive behavior can interfere with their own learning and that of others, and they may develop negative attitudes towards education.

Substance Abuse: There is an increased likelihood of substance abuse among individuals with a history of bullying perpetration (Thakkar et al., 2021), which can further compound their difficulties in other life domains.

Poor Interpersonal Relationships: The traits often associated with or fostered by persistent bullying—such as low empathy, narcissism, and manipulative tendencies—can severely hinder the development of healthy, reciprocal, and satisfying interpersonal relationships in adolescence and adulthood (Malhi et al., 2014). They may struggle with intimacy, trust, and cooperation.

Development of Aggressive Tendencies and Authoritarian Behavior: Studies, including those from India, have shown that individuals who bully in school may continue to exhibit

aggressive tendencies in other contexts and may adopt an authoritarian manner in their interactions at home and, if they pursue further education or employment, in those settings as well (Kshirsagar et al., 2007; Malhi et al., 2014).

Mental Health Issues: While bully-victims are often highlighted for severe mental health problems (NASEM, 2016), perpetrators are not immune. Difficulties with emotion regulation, which can be both a precursor to and a consequence of aggressive behavior, can contribute to later mental health challenges (NASEM, 2016; Shekhawat & Mishra, 2024). Furthermore, the social isolation that can result from long-term aggressive behavior can also negatively impact mental well-being.

Biological Impacts: While less directly studied for "pure" perpetrators compared to victims or bully-victims, exposure to violence—which perpetrators both inflict and may experience in return, or may have experienced in their home environments—has been associated with accelerated telomere erosion, a biological marker of stress and aging (NASEM, 2016).

The trajectory for many perpetrators reveals the self-defeating nature of their aggression. Despite motivations that might include gaining power, control, or social status, the long-term consequences often lead to outcomes that are the antithesis of these goals. Instead of achieving lasting respect or influence, they are more likely to face social marginalization, academic and occupational failure, and legal troubles. This pattern suggests that the "power" achieved through bullying is often illusory, built on a foundation of fear, and ultimately unsustainable, setting the perpetrator on a path that undermines their future well-being and successful integration into society.

Towards Intervention: Addressing and Modifying Perpetrator Behavior

Addressing the behavior of individuals who perpetrate bullying requires more than simple punitive measures, which often fail to tackle the underlying causes of the aggression. Effective interventions aim to address these root causes, teach empathy and prosocial skills, modify cognitive distortions that justify bullying, and alter the environmental factors that enable or reinforce such behavior. While a full review of intervention programs is beyond the scope of this paper, highlighting key elements relevant to perpetrators is important.

Key Intervention Elements:

Whole-School Approaches: Comprehensive programs like the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) and Finland's KiVa program emphasize creating a positive school climate where bullying is not tolerated. They often include components aimed at educating all students about the impact of bullying, promoting empathy, and fostering a sense of group responsibility for preventing aggression (Limber, 2011; Kärnä et al., 2011). Such approaches aim to change the school norms that might otherwise support or ignore perpetrator behavior.

Skill-Building: Interventions frequently focus on building essential social and emotional skills in perpetrators. This includes fostering emotional understanding (as in Canada's Roots

of Empathy program, which aims to reduce overall aggression; World Health Organization, 2004), developing empathy for others, teaching anger management and conflict resolution skills, and promoting prosocial alternative behaviors.

Addressing Systemic Issues and Implementation Gaps: For interventions targeting perpetrators to be successful, the broader school system must be responsive and supportive. This involves addressing the "implementation gap" often seen in anti-bullying efforts (Defriyanto et al., 2024; Roy et al., 2019). Crucial systemic changes include providing thorough and ongoing training for teachers in effective classroom management, behavior modification techniques, and specific anti-bullying strategies. It also requires consistent enforcement of anti-bullying policies and ensuring that there are clear consequences for perpetrating behavior. Furthermore, tackling institutional biases that may inadvertently protect certain perpetrators or ignore specific types of bullying (e.g., identity-based bullying) is essential (On education, 2025).

Challenging Moral Disengagement: Given that moral disengagement plays a significant role in enabling perpetrators to continue their harmful actions without self-censure (Konnikova, 2015), interventions should aim to directly challenge these cognitive distortions. This might involve helping perpetrators to accurately perceive the harm they cause, take the perspective of their victims, and reconnect with moral standards.

The effort to change perpetrator behavior cannot be divorced from the need for broader systemic reform within schools and, at times, communities. Individualized interventions for those who bully are far more likely to be effective when they occur within an environment that actively discourages aggression, consistently applies consequences, and provides strong support for prosocial alternatives. As previously discussed, the "ecosystem of aggression" highlights how various environmental factors can nurture or enable perpetrator behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Defriyanto et al., 2024). Therefore, simply attempting to "fix" the individual perpetrator without addressing these enabling environmental conditions—such as a negative school climate, ineffective teacher responses, or peer groups that reward aggression—is akin to treating a symptom without addressing the underlying disease. Effective and sustainable change in perpetrator behavior necessitates a concerted effort to transform the school culture into one that actively promotes respect, empathy, and safety for all members.

Conclusion: A Complex Portrait Requiring Comprehensive Understanding

The individual who perpetrates bullying is not a simple caricature of malice but rather a product of complex and interacting factors. These influences span individual psychological traits, family life and upbringing, peer dynamics and social learning processes, the school environment and its prevailing climate, and broader societal and cultural messages. While the harm inflicted by bullies on the victims is very painful (like teasing individuals with racist, casteist, or other derogatory remarks) and often severe (like telling them to do any illegal or unlawful task or physically hurting them), their behavior is rarely the result of a single cause. In many cases, it grows out of a mix of learned behavior, unhealthy ways of

coping with their own emotional pain, a desire to gain control or status in a particular social setting, or simply a lack of awareness and empathy for how their actions affect and worsen the lives of others. To truly address bullying, it's important to understand these overlapping factors. Only then can we move beyond punishment and toward strategies that get to the root of the problem. Those who bully often face long-term negative consequences themselves, which are discussed in this paper. These outcomes highlight why thoughtful intervention matters that takes into account all the conditions that can transform an individual who was once innocent into a ferocious perpetrator. So, actions should be taken at all places, whether it is school, university, or home, to teach individuals to become good humans who understand the pain of others and spread happiness, but not fear or harm with their harmful actions like bullying.

Suggestions

As per the review done and the problem deeply understood, the following suggestions can play a key role if followed:

1. Schools should implement structured whole-school interventions such as KiVa or OBPP that reshape the school climate and discourage bullying norms.
2. Teacher training must be enhanced to include behavior management, empathy education, and recognition of signs of aggression.
3. Perpetrators should be provided with counselling focused on emotional regulation, moral reasoning, and developing empathy.
4. The role of peer groups must be actively addressed through peer-led anti-bullying campaigns and the reinforcement of prosocial behaviors.
5. Families should be educated about the consequences of harsh or neglectful parenting and trained in positive discipline strategies.
6. Media literacy programs should be introduced to help students critically interpret violent or aggressive content online and in entertainment.
7. Policy-makers should support longitudinal monitoring of bullying behavior and fund evidence-based interventions targeting both school and community levels.

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