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THE PHENOMENON OF SCHOOL BULLYING AMONG INDONESIAN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

Although school bullying has received considerable scholarly attention, understanding of the psychological processes underlying bullying perpetration among high school students remains limited. This study aims to explore the psychology of bullying perpetrators by examining why students engage in aggressive behavior toward their peers. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through triangulation involving in-depth interviews, participant and non-participant observation, and documentation studies, including school records and incident reports. Informants were selected purposively based on their involvement in bullying incidents and demographic variation. Data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, while validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation, member checking, and audit trails. The findings indicate that bullying behavior develops through habituation in social interactions, in which actions initially perceived as humorous or as attempts to gain peer approval are repeatedly reinforced by laughter, encouragement, and imitation. Key motivating factors include the need for recognition and dominance, emotional instability, low impulse control, past experiences of abusive treatment or authoritarian parenting, and

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unstable friendship patterns. However, some perpetrators developed moral awareness after recognizing the psychological impact of their actions on victims, indicating the potential for empathetic and rehabilitative interventions. These findings suggest that bullying is not merely the result of individual intention but emerges from complex interactions between internal factors, such as emotion and affective regulation, and external factors, including peer, family, and school environments. This study contributes to bullying prevention literature by highlighting the psychological and social mechanisms underlying perpetrator behavior and provides practical implications for integrated interventions, including social-emotional skills education, proactive school policies, parenting programs, and restorative approaches to support the recovery of both perpetrators and victims.

Keywords: Bullying Perpetration; Adolescents; Perpetrator Psychology; Peer Relations; Social Environment

INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a common occurrence in schools, including at the high school level. Various reports indicate that cases of school violence continue to emerge from time to time, involving students as both perpetrators and victims. This situation demonstrates that bullying is not simply juvenile delinquency, but aggressive behavior that impacts students' social and psychological lives (Aṣṭor & Benbenishty, 2019). Furthermore, bullying can be influenced by environmental factors, social interactions, and adolescents' lack of emotional control. Therefore, the phenomenon of bullying needs to be understood more deeply, particularly from the perspective of the perpetrators, to understand the reasons why someone commits such an act (Fitri, 2024).

Bullying or juvenile delinquency is a negative and aggressive behavior caused by an individual's lack of ability to control immature emotions, which causes individuals to be easily influenced by the environment or a group to carry out bullying behavior (Agustina et al., 2024). This condition is often exacerbated by high levels of egocentrism, where adolescents tend to prioritize personal dominance without considering the moral consequences of their actions. This aligns with the definition of bullying, which is violent behavior involving the abuse of power against someone perceived as physically and mentally weak and vulnerable (Agisyaputri et al., 2023).

Bullying behavior can be influenced by various factors, both internal and environmental. Individual factors, such as aggressiveness, irritability, and a tendency to resolve problems through conflict, can increase a person's risk of becoming a bully. Furthermore, family factors also play a significant role, particularly parenting styles that lack attention, supervision, and moral education. Peer influence also reinforces this behavior, as adolescents tend to follow social circles that support bullying. School environments that lack supervision and strict rules against bullying can also lead to increased occurrences of this behavior. Adolescents who have experienced violence or abuse may even use bullying as an outlet for their emotions. As a result, bullying not only negatively impacts the victim but also experiences psychological and social consequences, such as feelings of guilt, low self-esteem, difficulty interacting socially, and the risk of depression and long-term aggressive behavior (Febrianti et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of bullying among adolescents in Senior High Schools (SMA) has become a serious concern in educational and psychological research. The first study by Ningrum (2016) found that bullying in high schools includes four main forms: verbal (teasing, teasing), physical (hitting, kicking), relational (excluding), and electronic (cyberbullying via social media), with the level of violence reaching 67.9% in high schools and 43.7% being peer-to-peer violence, the majority of which is psychological violence. The second study by Rahmadhanti (2025) identified the causal factors of bullying including peer pressure, dysfunctional family dynamics, the desire to demonstrate social dominance, and low awareness of the negative impacts of such behavior, with Don Olweus' theoretical framework emphasizing power inequality as the main trigger. The third study by Amalia and Haryati (2023) also showed the impact of bullying on decreased psychological well-being and poor social adjustment, including negative emotions such as anger, revenge, depression, shame, sadness, as well as impaired academic achievement due to difficulties adjusting to the social environment. Finally, Mumtaz and Dasalinda (2024) confirmed that bullying is strongly correlated with mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and even suicidal ideation. The data shows a significant spike in bullying cases in Indonesia from 194 cases (2022) to 573 cases (2024).

Based on the explanation above, this article will examine the phenomenon of bullying among high school students from the perspective of the perpetrator's psychology, namely why someone engages in bullying behavior against their friends. The focus of the research is directed at psychological factors that drive individuals to become perpetrators, such as

immature emotional control, the need for dominance, environmental influences, and aggressive past experiences. By understanding the psychological profile of the perpetrator, it is hoped that it can provide a foundation for teachers, parents, and counselors in designing a more targeted approach to dealing with bullying, not only by imposing sanctions but also through understanding and psychological recovery.

METHODS

The researchers in this study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to deeply understand the phenomenon of bullying among high school students from the perspective of the perpetrators' psychology (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2021; Sugiyono, 2020). A qualitative-descriptive approach was chosen because the research focused on describing the characteristics, behavioral patterns, and perceptions and motivations of bullies in their natural context, without researcher intervention. This approach allows for the presentation of findings in narrative form that explains the meaning and processes behind bullying.

Data were collected using data triangulation techniques in the form of in-depth interviews, participant/non-participatory observation, and relevant documentation studies (school records, incident reports, and social artifacts). In-depth interviews focused on the subjective experiences, motives, and perceptions of perpetrators. Observations were used to capture behaviors and interactions in the school environment. Documentation complemented and verified verbal data and provided temporal and institutional context (Moleong, 2014; Rosidah et al., 2023). Informants were selected purposively based on criteria of involvement in bullying incidents and demographic variations to obtain a rich representation of the phenomenon.

Data analysis was conducted inductively, with stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification, following thematic analysis procedures to identify psychological patterns underlying the perpetrators' behavior (Rijali, 2019; Yusuf, 2016). To increase the credibility and dependability of the findings, the study employed data validity techniques such as source and technique triangulation, member checking, and audit trail documentation. Research ethics were maintained through informed consent, confidentiality of informants, and institutional approval, when necessary.

RESULTS

The Emergence of Bullying Behavior in High School Students

Interviews conducted by researchers with three subjects revealed that bullying behavior does not emerge suddenly, but rather develops through a process of social interaction that occurs in everyday life. Some subjects admitted that the actions were initially considered just for fun or following the mood of friends. However, the habit gradually became repetitive because it was carried out continuously in the same environment. These findings suggest that bullying can develop from habituation in unhealthy social relationships (Permata & Nasution, 2022). In the context of adolescents, such behavior is often not immediately understood as a serious problem. This demonstrates that aggressive behavior can emerge from social situations that are considered normal by the perpetrator.

Initially, the bullying behavior of the three subjects appeared to be viewed as entertaining and socially satisfying because it evoked laughter from their peers. This enjoyment arose from social reinforcement—positive group responses (laughter, attention) that reinforced aggressive behavior as a mechanism for gaining status or recognition within their peer group (Ovita, 2025). This pattern suggests that social context and group dynamics play a significant role in the normalization of demeaning behavior. Actions intended as "jokes" or "funny" may be rooted in efforts to maintain social relationships, while simultaneously masking the negative impact on the victim so that the perpetrator does not initially perceive it as wrong.

However, after being informed about the psychological and emotional consequences for the victim, subjects 1 and 2 began to show guilt and realized that their actions had crossed the line. This change in attitude indicates the emergence of moral reflection that was able to suppress the initial aggressive impulse. They began to internalize the victim's perspective and acknowledge the harm caused. Subject 3, while acknowledging some satisfaction in being treated similarly, expressed an effort to restrain himself for the sake of his role as a student—signifying a conflict between the instinct for revenge and social/institutional norms. Overall, these findings demonstrate the tension between socio-aggressive needs and the development of individual moral awareness, and emphasize the importance of educational interventions that increase empathy and social responsibility to reduce bullying behavior.

Interviews revealed that the need for peer recognition is a key driver of bullying behavior. Subjects 1 and 2 admitted that they had wanted to appear cool, brave, or be

respected by other children in class; this motivation led them to engage in actions that displayed dominance or excessive bravado. During this process, environmental responses—such as cheers, laughter, and imitation from classmates—served as social reinforcement that reinforced aggressive behavior. This type of positive reinforcement diminished the individual's sense of responsibility and minimized empathy for the victim, making bullying more likely to recur and escalate (Salbiyah et al., 2026).

Furthermore, friendship patterns and social ties also play a crucial role in the dynamics of bullying. Subject 3 expressed a tendency to move from one social circle to another due to a lack of close friends and discomfort with socializing in groups, conditions that make him vulnerable to negative influences and a lack of emotional support. This instability in social networks can lead to feelings of isolation or the need to seek acceptance through inappropriate means, both as a perpetrator and as a follower in a bullying group. Thus, peer interactions and the quality of friendships are important factors mediating the emergence and persistence of bullying behavior in adolescents (Kharismah et al., 2025)

Family Factors and Past Experiences

Family factors and past experiences also appeared to influence the subjects' behavior. Subjects 1 and 2 stated that their parents were quite strict, but sometimes busy, so they rarely had the opportunity to talk. Subject 2 also admitted to being teased by upperclassmen and then dismissed it as something normal. Subject 3 reported that he experienced strictness from family members, had been slandered by both upperclassmen and classmates, and preferred to distance himself from friends who were considered too free-spirited. These findings suggest that past experiences, communication patterns at home, and the social environment contribute to how subjects respond to conflict (Anggraini et al., 2024).

Emotional instability consistently emerged as a primary trigger for aggressive behavior in all three subjects. Subjects 1 and 2 stated that experiences of stress or domestic conflict often made them prone to venting their emotions on others in the school environment—whether through teasing, teasing, or even mild physical aggression. In such situations, impulse control decreases, resulting in aggressive actions as a temporary release mechanism for internal tension. This behavior demonstrates a maladaptive coping pattern: instead of managing the source of stress or seeking support, the subjects chose to direct pressure at more vulnerable targets around them (Saputra, 2025).

In contrast to the two aforementioned subjects, Subject 3 described a more pro-social emotional management strategy. When experiencing problems, he tended to confide in someone he trusted to relieve the pressure. However, Subject 3 also acknowledged a threshold: if emotional distress is not addressed, he becomes more irritable and at risk of aggressive behavior. This difference in emotional management styles between subjects confirms that a lack of emotional regulation skills not only increases the likelihood of bullying, but that its severity and form are influenced by how individuals seek support and their own coping skills.

Moral awareness began to emerge in all three perpetrators when the consequences of their actions became apparent. Subject 1 and Subject 2 expressed shock and regret after learning that the victim was crying or absent from school as a result of their actions; these reactions gave rise to strong feelings of guilt. These emotional reactions indicate that despite the aggressive impulses, there remains a capacity for empathy and self-reflection that can be mobilized, for example, through interventions that emphasize the consequences for the victim and structured empathy development (Pereira, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The Phenomenon of Bullying in High School

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that often occurs in social environments, particularly among adolescents and in school settings. In Indonesian, bullying is defined as an act of bullying carried out intentionally and repeatedly with the aim of harming the victim, whether physically, verbally, or psychologically. This behavior includes not only physical violence such as hitting or pushing, but also teasing, insults, threats, social exclusion, and the spreading of rumors that can damage the victim's mental health (Koller & Darida, 2020). These actions are usually carried out by individuals or groups who feel they have more power, strength, or influence than the victim. As a result, bullying can have serious negative impacts on the victim's life, such as decreased self-confidence, the emergence of fear, stress, anxiety, and even emotional disorders that can affect the victim's social life and learning process at school (Marlina et al., 2024).

Bullying is negative behavior carried out intentionally and repeatedly by an individual or group against someone perceived as weaker. This action can be physical (hitting, pushing), verbal (taunting, insults), or psychological (intimidation, spreading gossip), and is often

accompanied by the intention to hurt, demean, or dominate the victim. The hallmarks of bullying are repetition and intention; it is not just a single conflict, but rather a pattern of ongoing behavior that creates insecurity for the victim (Sutinah et al., 2025).

One of the main factors contributing to bullying is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. This power can be overt—such as physical superiority or the number of friends in a group—or covert, such as social status, communication skills, access to information, or influence within the school community. This imbalance makes it difficult for victims to resist or seek support; when the perpetrator feels protected by their position, aggressive behavior is more likely to continue without significant consequences (Haslan et al., 2022).

Among adolescents and in school settings, bullying often manifests as teasing, insults, social exclusion, threats, or physical violence, which can have far-reaching consequences. Its impacts include mental health problems (anxiety, depression), decreased academic performance, lowered self-esteem, and long-term relationship problems. Therefore, effective prevention requires integrated interventions: empathy and social skills education, strong school policies, and psychosocial support for victims and rehabilitation efforts for perpetrators.

Bullying behavior in adolescents is often influenced by interactions with peers, which is a major factor in their social development. Many adolescents spend more time with their friends than with their families, resulting in close peer relationships (Scholte & Aken, 2020). These relationships play a role in shaping their behavior patterns. Peers who support or normalize bullying behavior can increase the likelihood of adolescents engaging in it, while groups that value positive behavior can reduce the occurrence of bullying.

Peers will influence their friends' behavior, but it all comes down to each individual's perception. Therefore, attitudes and behavior can be influenced by peer pressure, which is an individual's drive to commit coercive acts. Peers are divided into five groups: close friends, large groups, small groups, gangs, and organized groups. Peer pressure is said to encourage oneself or others to engage in bullying behavior through various behaviors such as threats and intimidation, hurting, and terrorizing, which are done repeatedly (Lakilaki et al., 2025).

Factors Influencing Bullying

The family environment plays a central role in shaping adolescent behavior because it is the first context in which norms, ways of managing emotions, and relationship patterns are learned. Authoritarian or overly harsh parenting styles (e.g., physical punishment, strict prohibitions without explanation) often lead to feelings of depression, anger, or low self-esteem in adolescents. Without safe channels of communication, these emotions can be diverted into aggressive behavior toward peers at school. Conversely, a lack of parental attention or involvement (such as minimal supervision of daily activities or infrequent meaningful conversations) leads adolescents to seek recognition outside the family, which can lead them to engage in bullying to gain social standing (Siregar, 2019). Family-based interventions, such as parenting programs that emphasize warm nurturing, open communication, and positive discipline, have been shown to be effective in reducing the risk of aggressive behavior.

Peer influence operates through mechanisms of social identity and conformity pressure: adolescents are highly sensitive to group acceptance, often adapting their behavior to fit within group norms. In this context, teasing or belittling others can become a form of "ritual" to demonstrate courage or status. Those seeking acceptance may participate even if they personally disagree (Andini, 2019). This dynamic is reinforced by informal power structures in schools (e.g., cliques that control who is allowed in), which make bullying a tool for maintaining social hierarchies. Effective interventions include peer mediation programs, assertiveness skills training, and group activities that promote inclusion and empathy among peers.

Psychological and emotional factors are related to affect regulation and individual character. Adolescents who experience emotional instability, are easily angered, impulsive, or have poor ability to manage stress and frustration are more susceptible to using verbal or physical violence as a way to express their feelings. Untreated mental disorders (such as depression, conduct disorder, or impulse control issues) increase the likelihood of bullying. Furthermore, poor empathy skills make perpetrators less sensitive to the impact on victims. Therefore, psychosocial screening in schools, social-emotional learning programs, and access to adolescent counseling are important to reduce the incidence of bullying (Karim et al., 2025).

The experience of being a victim is a paradoxical factor: some perpetrators have actually experienced violence or exclusion before, so they imitate the patterns they experienced or use bullying as a strategy to avoid being targeted again. Unprocessed trauma can lead to defensiveness and aggression, while the normalization of mistreatment makes bullying seem acceptable. It means that interventions cannot simply address the perpetrator; healing efforts for children who have been victimized are necessary—including trauma-focused psychotherapy, restorative justice programs that facilitate the connection between victims and perpetrators, and a relearning of social norms that emphasize respect and reconciliation.

The broader social environment and media influence behavioral norms and the availability of models for aggressive behavior. The normalization of violence within the environment (e.g., the widespread acceptance of derogatory jokes) and exposure to aggressive content on social media, in games, or on television can lower moral barriers to bullying and provide a "manual" for behavior that adolescents imitate. Social media algorithms that reinforce echo chambers can also promote content that glorifies aggressive acts or humiliates others. Reducing risk requires a multi-sectoral approach: media literacy for adolescents to critically evaluate content, clear school policies against online bullying, and community campaigns that change social norms about humor and violence (Malikhao, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, bullying behavior in high school adolescents is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors: peer influence and the desire to be accepted in a group, past experiences including being a victim, family conditions, and emotional instability that reduces self-control; interviews with three subjects indicate that actions that were initially seen as jokes or social adaptations developed into repeated behavior when the peer environment provided support (cheers, laughter, invitations) that increased the perpetrator's self-confidence; however, some perpetrators still showed moral awareness—feeling guilty after realizing the impact on the victim—indicating that bullying is not solely a product of individual intentions but the result of a complex interaction between personal experiences, social dynamics, emotional conditions, and the ability to regulate emotions.

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