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Isak Kim

University of Nebraska at Omaha, isakkim@unomaha.edu

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ASSESSMENT AND DIAGNOSIS

Profiles of participation in school bullying: Association with student well-being

Isak Kim¹  | Hye Yeon Lee² | Jun Sung Hong^{3,4}  | JoLynn V. Carney⁵ | Richard J. Hazler⁵

¹Department of Counseling, University of Nebraska Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

²Wallace H. Coulter Department of Biomedical Engineering, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

³School of Social Work, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA

⁴Department of Social Welfare, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, USA

⁵Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Correspondence

Isak Kim, Department of Counseling, University of Nebraska Omaha, Omaha, NE, USA.
Email: isakkim@unomaha.edu

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the bullying participation profiles in relation to the demographic variables (sex, grade, and ethnicity), and to further investigate the associations between the profiles and student well-being indicators. A final sample for analyses consisted of 725 elementary school children (fourth to sixth grades). Four latent profiles were identified through the latent profile analysis: bullying passive bystander (8.00%), victimized active defender (8.41%), uninvolved passive bystander (21.24%), and uninvolved active defender (62.35%). Significant group differences were found in key variables representing student well-being, that is, school connectedness and life satisfaction, across the four latent profiles. Children in the uninvolved active defender were found to have the highest levels of student well-being. Only sex had a significant association with the profiles of demographic variables, with boys more likely to belong to the bullying passive bystander profile than girls. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

KEYWORDS

latent profile analysis, life satisfaction, school bullying, school connectedness, student well-being

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is defined as repeated aggression directed at individuals who are disadvantaged or less powerful within peer interactions (Jimerson et al., 2009). Findings from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, National Survey of Children's Health, and the School Crime Supplement suggested that approximately 20% of children, across all age groups from 6 to 17, are victimized by their peers in school (Kann et al., 2016; Lebrun-Harris et al., 2018; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). In particular, school bullying is more prevalent among younger children compared with older school-aged children (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Bullying is a group process, which involves more than just bullying perpetration and victimization (Salmivalli, 2010). Bullying occurs in a social context where various factors play a role in promoting, maintaining, or inhibiting the process (e.g., Rodkin & Hodges, 2003).

The participant roles in school bullying were first proposed by Salmivalli et al. (1996) who argued that participation in bullying involves more than just perpetration, victimization, and victimization/perpetration (Veenstra et al., 2005). Participants' roles also include multiple bystander roles, such as assistants (joining the bullies), reinforcers (encouraging bullying), defenders (intervening in bullying incidents or comforting victims), and outsiders (staying away from bullying situations) (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Later in the literature on the participants' roles, a great deal of previous research has focused on two types of bystander behaviors: active defending and passive bystander (Gini et al., 2008; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Active defending is to take side with the victims, comfort the victims, intervene to stop the bullying, and/or ask for an adult's help, such as a teacher, whereas passive bystander refers to withdrawing from the situation, avoiding bullying incidents going on, or remaining as a silent observant (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010).

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Participation in school bullying has a negative impact on psychological and emotional well-being not only for victims and perpetrators but also for bystanders (e.g., Lester & Mander, 2015; Thomas et al., 2016). Peer aggression and victimization are associated with feeling disconnected from school (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010; Wormington et al., 2016), less satisfaction at school, and less subjective happiness (Arseneault et al., 2006; Savahl et al., 2019). In response, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2018) identified the creation of safe school environments that is free from violence and bullying as a global priority. Although the dynamic nature of participation in bullying across roles complicates the consequences of bullying, less is known about how individuals play multiple roles across situations. Students' school connectedness and life satisfaction may be influenced by distinct participation in bullying that has not been examined in the research. The complex dynamic of bullying demonstrates a need for more empirical research on how individual students are involved in multiple roles in bullying situations. The current study aimed to identify profiles of the multiple roles in bullying and the association with student well-being.

Classification of bullying participation

One of the most common ways to investigate students' participation in bullying is by identifying four subgroups: bullies, victims, bully-victims, and uninvolved (Lovegrove et al., 2012). A typical way of categorization in the literature is with standard deviations (SD) above or below the average level of bullying and victimization as a cut-off score (Pan et al., 2017). This approach entails two critical limitations even though it efficiently determines group membership in terms of bullying and victimization. First, the dichotomous classification of bullies and victims fails to consider other participant roles, such as bystanders or defenders, even though these other participants' roles are crucial in understanding children's participation in bullying. Second, the approach fails to view the participant roles as actions an individual can hold simultaneously, by categorizing participation in bullying as one single role. These limitations require further research with emphasis on individuals simultaneously having multiple participant roles.

Recent results demonstrated that individuals do perform multiple roles across different situations and contexts. Frey et al. (2014) showed that bystanders can be defenders of targets at one time and encourage perpetrators at another depending on particular circumstances including the setting or people involved. Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2018) reported that bystanders could also be bullies or victims depending on the situation. Jenkins and Nickerson (2017) suggested that it would be more appropriate to examine the extent of the behaviors that children display (e.g., bullying, active defending, and passive bystanding) rather than just focusing on the categories of bullying participation.

Use of person-centered approaches in understanding bullying participation

Latent profile analysis (LPA) is a multivariate statistical model used to investigate the underlying grouping variables beyond observed scores through the use of continuous indicators (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). This analytical method can help address the limitations mentioned above by identifying unobserved data (i.e., latent profiles). LPA is also viewed as a "person-centered" analysis in comparison with a "variable-centered" approach. The unique purpose of a person-centered approach (e.g., LPA, cluster analysis) is "to determine if subgroups of similar subjects exist within a given population," whereas a variable-centered approach (e.g., regression, structural equation modeling) aims "to explain the relationship between specific variables in a given population" (Howard & Hoffman, 2018, p. 849). Using LPA, individuals playing multiple bullying roles across situations can be captured across different profiles, and counselors can get a better understanding of participatory patterns across different roles in bullying among children.

Several investigators have identified groups of bullying participation using latent class/profile analysis. Those investigations constructed four latent classes of bullying and victimization: victims, bullies, bully/victims, and uninvolved (Lovegrove et al., 2012; Pan et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Williford et al. (2011) similarly classified four latent subgroups as the victim, aggressor, aggressor-victim, and uninvolved. Another study that employed LCA yielded three victim classes based on the degree of victimization rather than a type of participation (Nylund, Bellmore, et al., 2007). Zhang et al. (2020) investigated peer victimization classification using the latent transition analysis and its relationship to delinquent behavior. Despite the significant advances made in these studies, few attempts have been made to understand bullying using a person-centered approach, based on the participant roles (e.g., active defending, passive bystanding) beyond the previously mentioned bully-victim or aggressor-victim dyad. This indicates a need to further explore how these roles might be displayed across profiles.

Participation in bullying and students' psychosocial outcomes

Students' psychosocial well-being at school is conceptualized as how students experience their daily school life (Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2000). School connectedness and life satisfaction are primary factors comprising well-being within the school context (Lenz et al., 2020; Suldo et al., 2006). School connectedness refers to students' beliefs that adults and peers in the school care about them as themselves (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Connectedness in social contexts, such as school, is a vital source of youth support, which can enhance their psychosocial well-being (Jose et al., 2012). Life satisfaction is considered a

cognitive component of well-being that means the subjective evaluation of one's life (Diener et al., 2018). Students' well-being can, therefore, be viewed as the way children experience connectedness, feel satisfied, and have success in the school context.

Students' involvement in school bullying is reported to be significantly correlated with their psychosocial well-being. A lower level of school connectedness is positively associated with the risk of adverse outcomes, such as peer aggression and exposure to violence (Brookmeyer et al., 2006). A lower level of school connectedness is also found to be related to more bullying perpetration and victimization (You et al., 2008). Victimized youth were more likely to experience lower levels of life satisfaction (Blood et al., 2011; You et al., 2008). Expanding these results by exploring the relationship between participation in multiple roles in school bullying and school connectedness as well as life satisfaction can more effectively reflect the complex dynamics of bullying participation as correlates of students' well-being at school.

Theoretical framework

The Ecological Systems Framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) conceptualizes human development as the result of interactions between multiple-level contexts. Multiple-level contexts include individual factors, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Individual factors, such as sex, age, and race/ethnicity, are at the innermost level, followed by peers, families, schools, neighborhoods, and societal factors at the outermost level. Structures, where children have direct contact are defined as the *microsystem*, such as home, peer groups, school, and community. The interaction between two or more microsystems is referred to as the *mesosystem*, such as the impact of parent-child attachment on peer relations at school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In the school bullying literature, the Ecological Systems Framework has been frequently applied to focus on how sociodemographic characteristics, such as sex, age, and race/ethnicity of children interact with the environmental systems to explain students' participation in bullying (Espelage, 2014). The manner in which a child participates in bullying can both result in and be influenced by different individual characteristics and interactions within the microsystems, which is referred to as mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In line with the Social-Ecological Framework, we posit that individual characteristics, peer interactions in bullying incidents, and children's well-being at school would be interrelated and influence each other.

Current study

The relationships between latent profiles of different participation roles in school bullying and their associations with students' school connectedness and life satisfaction were examined. We explore, centering on the varied peer

interaction (i.e., bullying, victimization, active defending, and passive bystanding), how individual characteristics are associated with the patterns of peer interaction, and how school connectedness and life satisfaction differed among students. The current investigation included three research questions as follows:

Research question 1. What is the nature of latent profiles representing participation in bullying among 4–6th grade elementary school children?

Research question 2. What is the association between the profiles of participation in bullying and student well-being, such as school connectedness and school life satisfaction?

Research question 3. What is the association between the profiles of participation in bullying and individual-level demographic characteristics?

METHOD

Participants

Study participants included 725 elementary school students ranging from fourth to sixth graders. The main analysis in this study was an LPA. Among a variety of rules-of-thumb have been introduced to determine target sample size requirements for latent analysis (e.g., Dziak et al., 2014; Nylund, Asparouhov, et al., 2007), we followed Nylund, Asparouhov, et al.'s (2007) rule that a minimum sample size of about 500 is required to obtain enough accuracy in identifying an appropriate number of latent profiles. Grade level was 24.97% ($n = 181$) in fourth grade, 35.72% ($n = 259$) in fifth grade, and 39.31% ($n = 285$) in sixth grade. For sex, 50.62% ($n = 367$) were boys, 47.31% ($n = 343$) were girls, and 15 students (2.07%) were unreported. Participants were mainly White (76.60%), followed by African American (5.24%), Hispanic/Latino (3.45%), Native American (1.02%), Asian (0.64%), multiracial (2.94%), others (6.14%), and unreported (3.5%).

Measures

Participation in school bullying

Students' participation in school bullying was assessed using subscales from the University of Illinois Victimization Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001) and Self-reported Behaviors During Bullying Episodes (Pozzoli et al., 2012). First, Espelage and Holt (2001) developed the University of Illinois Victimization Scale to measure students' experience of bullying perpetration and victimization. The measure includes items assessing students' frequency of bullying behavior and peer victimization in the past 30 days. Previous studies supported moderate levels of internal consistency ranging between 0.77 and 0.90 across both subscales (Espelage et al., 2018; Holt & Espelage,

2007; Rose et al., 2009). Second, Pozzoli et al. (2012) developed self-reports of Behaviors during bullying episodes. This measure includes items developed based on the participant roles approach, including four types of bullying participation: (a) bullying, (b) victimization, (c) active defending, and (d) passive bystanding. In the current investigation, subscales of active defending and passive bystanding were included to expand the additional forms of bullying participation to bullying perpetration and victimization. Previous studies supported a moderate level of internal consistency ranging from 0.68 to 0.79 for the selected subscales (e.g., Gini et al., 2015; Pozzoli et al., 2012).

Bullying and victimization

In this study, 13 items from the University of Illinois Victimization Scale were used to assess students' experience of bullying perpetration and victimization (Espelage & Holt, 2001). In terms of items assessing students' bullying and victimization, students are asked to rate how often in the past 30 days they bullied and/or were bullied by others, including various forms of bullying perpetration (e.g., verbal, physical, and relational bullying). Sample items on bullying perpetration included "I upset other students for the fun of it"; "In a group, I teased other students; I was mean to someone when I was angry; and I spread rumors about other students." Each item on the bullying behavior scale was endorsed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (7 or more times). A total of nine items were displayed, with an average score on 1.16 (SD = 0.31). Cronbach's alpha reliability for the scale was 0.90. Moreover, students' peer victimization was assessed by using four items from the University of Illinois Victimization Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Sample items on peer victimization included "Other students picked on me, Other students made fun of me," "Other students called me names," and "I got hit and pushed by other students." Average scores on peer victimization scale were 1.67 (SD = 0.93) on a five-point scale. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the scale was 0.90 in this study.

Active defending and passive bystanding

Students' active defending (three items) and passive bystanding (three items) were assessed by using six items from self-reported behaviors during bullying episodes (Pozzoli et al., 2012). Each item on active defending and passive bystanding scale was endorsed using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Sample items on active defending scale were as follows: "I defend the classmates who are hit or attacked hard; If someone teases or threatens a classmate, I try to stop him/her; and I try to help or comfort classmates who are isolated or excluded from the group." The internal consistency of 0.69 was reported in the current study with a mean of 3.38 (SD = 0.68). Moreover, sample items on passive defending scale were as follows: "When a classmate is hit or pushed, I stand by and I mind my own business," "If a classmate is teased or threatened, I do nothing and I don't meddle," and "If I know that someone is excluded or isolated from the group, I act as if

nothing had happened." The internal consistency of the passive bystanding subscale in this study was 0.74, and the mean score was 1.62 (SD = 0.72).

Individual-level variables

Participants were asked to answer three sociodemographic questions (sex, grade, and race/ethnicity) to identify individual characteristics. Sex was a binary question of boy or girl. The grade item included three response options (4, 5, or 6). Race/ethnicity included White, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native American Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Multiracial (parents of different races), and Others.

School connectedness

The four-item school connectedness scale (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2013) was used as a part of an assessment for student well-being—the degree to which students enjoy and feel like they belong to the school. Four items were rated on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items for school connectedness were as follows: "I enjoy coming to school, I have good relationships with my teachers and other adults at my school," "I am proud to be at my school," and "I feel like I belong to my school." Higher total scores corresponded to higher connectedness. Anderson-Butcher et al. (2013) reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.80 for 3436 elementary school students in grades 3 through 6 and evidenced a single-factor model with factor loadings ranging from 0.57 to 0.83 through confirmatory factor analysis. The internal consistency in the current study was 0.78 and a mean score was 3.93 (SD = 0.68), corresponding with previous studies that reported high internal consistency in elementary school children (e.g., Carney et al., 2018).

Life satisfaction

The Student's Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS; Huebner, 1991) is a self-report measure to assess the global life satisfaction of youth in grades 3 through 12. Students rated agreement with global satisfaction statements on a scale ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (6). SLSS consists of seven items such as "My life is going well, I wish I had a different kind of life (reversed), and I have a good life." Mean scores were calculated after two items were reversed, with higher scores indicating higher levels of life satisfaction. The original study found adequate internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and correlated highly with other subjective well-being measures (Huebner, 1991). Internal consistency in the current study was 0.84, and the mean score was 4.85 (SD = 0.94), which was consistently adequate as previous studies (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Lewis et al., 2011).

Procedure

Approval for the study from the university's Institutional Review Board and parental and student consent were obtained prior to the data collection. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants for this study in four rural elementary schools in the mid-Atlantic region through a pre-existing research partnership. Elementary school students with parental consent completed an electronic survey in their computer labs administered by school staff. The participants completed the survey questionnaire within 30 min. The survey included items related to bullying involvement, life satisfaction, and school connectedness. The overall response rate was 94%.

Data analysis

Data analyses proceeded in multiple steps. Descriptive statistics and binary correlation analyses were conducted first. The first research question was addressed using LPA to identify latent profiles of participation in school bullying (i.e., bullying, victimization, active defending, and passive bystanding) using Mplus 8.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). In the second research question, latent groups were used to identify the differences in distal outcomes (i.e., school connectedness, life satisfaction) with an additional analysis specifying DU3STEP (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). This three-step approach is an auxiliary command of the Mplus that uses latent group membership for the prediction of distal outcomes. We identified the differences in distal outcomes depending on the profile membership, through chi-square tests. The third research question was addressed by a series of chi-square tests to compare latent groups and sociodemographic variables, such as sex, grade, and ethnicity. Full information maximum likelihood estimation was used to handle missing data using Mplus, taking the missingness into account with the result of missing data analysis that the data are missing at random.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and binary correlations among the key variables are presented in Table 1. Regarding different types of participation in bullying, a higher prevalence of bullying was positively associated with more victimization ($r = 0.41$), and there was a negative association between active defending and passive bystanding ($r = -0.34$). Passive bystanding showed a positive relationship with bullying perpetration ($r = 0.15$), while active defending was negatively associated with bullying perpetration ($r = -0.11$). Of the sociodemographic variables, sex only showed a significant association with participation in bullying, indicating that boys were slightly more likely to experience bullying ($r = -0.18$), victimization ($r = -0.10$), and passive bystanding ($r = -0.10$) than girls. School

connectedness was positively correlated with life satisfaction ($r = 0.34$). (Table 2)

Research question 1: Latent profiles of bullying participation

We investigated the profiles of students' participation in bullying, which included students' roles of bullying perpetration, victimization, active defending, and passive bystanding. A series of LPAs were conducted to find the best model to represent groups of participation in bullying, with the consideration of information criteria, entropy, and statistical significance. Specifically, a series of models from 2-class through 5-class, information criteria such as Akaike's information criterion (AIC; Akaike, 1974) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC; Schwarz, 1978) and entropy value were used. Both AIC and BIC are used to measure the relative fit of the models, which refers to the model fit of one model's representation compared with that of another model. Lower values of the AIC and BIC indicate a better model fit. The entropy value is an absolute value, ranging from 0 to 1, which suggests that a greater value reflects a more precise indicator of the calculated model (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996). A bootstrap likelihood ratio test (BLRT) was also conducted to evaluate the significance of improvement in the model fit by comparing the two neighboring classes (i.e., comparing $k-1$ and k -class models) (Nylund, Asparouhov, et al., 2007). Finally, it is required that the classification ratio of each profile membership should have at least 5% of the entire sample (Nylund, Asparouhov, et al., 2007). Taken together, a variety of factors were considered to find the best model fit using the criteria mentioned above (see Table 1).

As suggested by Nylund, Asparouhov, et al. (2007), we excluded 5-class where one class membership consisted of less than 5% of the total respondents. We considered it to be important in deciding on the class model between 3-class and 4-class (BLRT: $ps < 0.001$). Between these two classes, we determined the 4-class model as a final model considering the 4-class model had lower BIC as compared to the 3-class model. The four classes are as follows: Class 1 (uninvolved active defending; 62.35%), Class 2 (uninvolved passive bystanding; 21.24%), Class 3 (bullying passive bystanding; 8.00%), and Class 4 (victimized active defending; 8.41%).

Class 1 represented students showing high levels of active defending, but not involved in bullying or victimization. Class 2 reflected students who presented as passive bystanding, but not involved in bullying or victimization. Class 3 was composed of students who reported being involved in the highest level of bullying behavior with high passive bystanding and moderate victimization. Students assigned to Class 4 reflected the highest levels of victimization and active defending simultaneously. The profiles of bullying participation in the classes are depicted in Figure 1.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Bullying	—								
2. Victimization	0.41**	—							
3. Active defending	−0.11**	0.07*	—						
4. Passive bystanding	0.15**	−0.04	−0.34**	—					
5. Sex	−0.18**	−0.10**	−0.02	−0.10**	—				
6. Grade	0.00	−0.01	0.01	−0.06	−0.02	—			
7. Ethnicity	0.08*	0.01	−0.04	−0.01	0.10	−0.02	—		
8. School connectedness	−0.21**	−0.13**	0.14**	−0.12**	0.19**	−0.07*	0.01	—	
9. Life satisfaction	−0.27**	−0.31**	0.09**	−0.13**	0.01	0.04	−0.10**	0.34**	—
<i>M</i>	1.16	1.67	3.38	1.62	—	—	—	3.93	4.85
<i>SD</i>	0.31	0.93	0.68	0.72	—	—	—	0.68	0.94

Note: Sex: 1 = boys ($n = 367$, 50.6%), 2 = girls ($n = 343$, 47.3%).

Grade: 1 = 4th ($n = 181$, 25.0%), 2 = 5th ($n = 259$, 35.7%), 3 = 6th ($n = 285$, 39.3%).

Ethnicity: 1 = White ($n = 562$, 77.5%), 2 = non-White ($n = 141$, 19.4%).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 2 Fit indices for two- to five-profile models

No. of classes	Information criteria				No. of free parameters	Entropy	Model Fit
	AIC	BIC	SABIC	Log-likelihood			BLRT (p)
2	6597.30	6656.92	6615.64	−3285.65	13	0.93	0.00
3	6395.00	6477.55	6420.40	−3179.50	18	0.93	0.00
4	6234.55	6340.03	6267.00	−3094.28	23	0.85	0.00
5	6120.09	6248.50	6159.59	−3032.05	28	0.87	0.00

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike's information criterion; BIC, Bayesian information criterion; SABIC, Sample size adjusted Bayesian information criterion; BLRT, bootstrap likelihood ratio test.

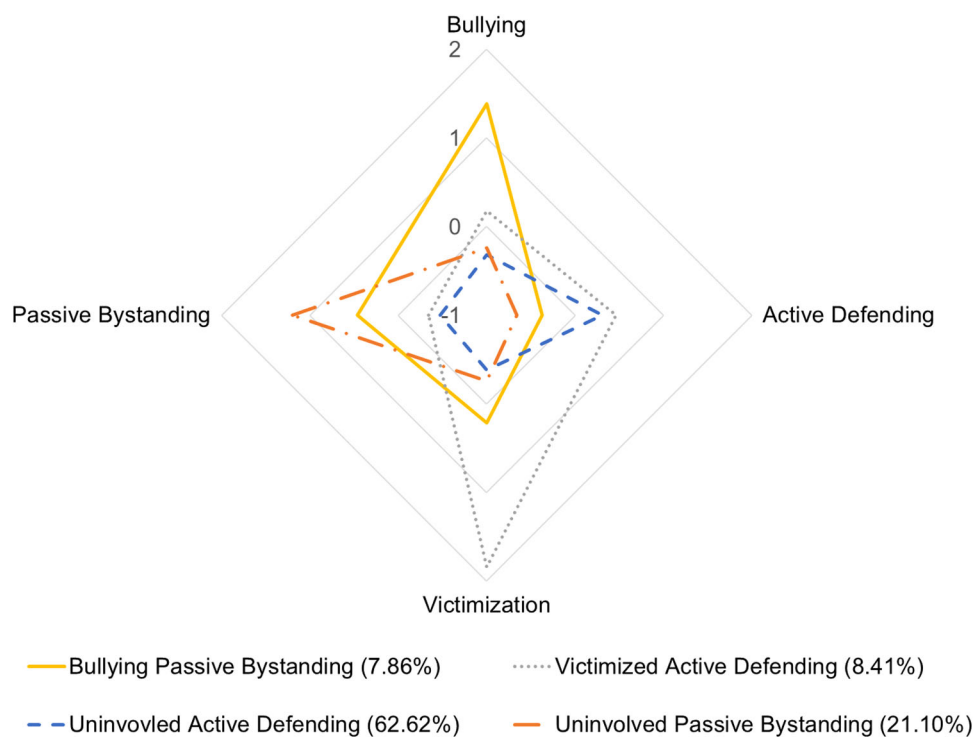
**FIGURE 1** Profiles of participation in school bullying

TABLE 3 Chi-square result of school connectedness and life satisfaction by class membership ($n = 725$)

Latent class	N(%) ^a	School connectedness ^b		Life satisfaction ^b	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
1. Uninvolved active defending	452 (62.35%)	4.05	0.04	5.16	0.06
2. Uninvolved passive bystanding	154 (21.24%)	3.78	0.09	4.39	0.11
3. Bullying passive bystanding	58 (8.00%)	3.53	0.15	4.55	0.17
4. Victimized active defending	61 (8.41%)	3.82	0.10	4.23	0.17
χ^2		19.72***		46.07***	
Post hoc		1>3**; 1>2, 4*		1>2,4***; 1>3**	

^aFinal class counts and proportions for the latent classes based on their most likely latent class membership.

^bEquality mean testing results.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Research question 2: Differences in school connectedness and life satisfaction based on the latent profiles

We examined the differences in school connectedness and life satisfaction, depending on latent groups of participation in bullying. School connectedness and life satisfaction were entered as distal outcomes when conducting latent profile analysis in RQ1. Significant differences were found in both school connectedness and life satisfaction across the four latent profiles. Uninvolved active defending ($M = 4.05$) reported the highest degree of school connectedness, followed by victimized active defending ($M = 3.82$), uninvolved passive bystanding ($M = 3.78$), and bullying passive bystanding ($M = 3.53$) in sequence. Students in the uninvolved active defending ($M = 5.16$) group were the most satisfied with their lives, followed by bullying passive bystanding ($M = 4.55$), uninvolved passive bystanding ($M = 4.39$), and victimized active defending ($M = 4.23$) groups.

Research question 3: Association between demographics and latent profiles

A series of chi-square tests reflected the extent of significant associations between sex, grade, race/ethnicity, and latent groups of bullying participation. One significant association was found between sex and the four latent groups ($p < 0.001$). No statistical significance was found for grade or race/ethnicity ($p > 0.22$). The prevalence of sex reported across latent groups is summarized in Table 3 with 15 students not included due to missing data.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined profiles of school bullying participation (RQ1), associations between profile membership, school connectedness, and life satisfaction (RQ2), and associations between latent profiles and sociodemographic variables (RQ3) among elementary school children. Our study investigated the complexities of school bullying by

considering various forms of bullying participation rather than focusing exclusively on perpetration and victimization. We explored four types of participation through LPA, which showed how students varied in school bullying participation. The four latent profiles, uninvolved active defending (62.35%), uninvolved passive bystanding (21.24%), bullying passive bystanding (8.00%), and victimized active defending (8.41%), showed that students' participation varied. Results also indicated students in the victimized active defending group reported the highest level of victimization (role) and the highest active defending behavior (action). Findings suggested that students in bullying situations are likely to be involved in multiple, participatory roles.

Findings regarding the first research question (i.e., identifying latent profiles) significantly added to the literature and provide three perspectives that counseling professionals and scholars can consider when comprehending bullying involvement among children. The first viewpoint considers heterogeneous participation in bullying as part of the overall approach rather than assuming a bully–victim dichotomy. Previous studies did examine the latent class/profile of bullying involvement (Lovegrove et al., 2012; Pan et al., 2017; Williford et al., 2011), but researchers did not include other forms of participation, such as active defending and passive bystanding behavior, as the current study. The second viewpoint offers perspectives on “behavior” rather than “role” to describe the nature of bullying involvement. Both a bully–victim dyad approach (e.g., bully, victim, bully–victim, and uninvolved; Veenstra et al., 2005) and a participant role approach (e.g., defender, bystander, reinforcer; Salmivalli, 1999, 2010) implied that an individual plays a single role. Bullying involvement, in the current study, was viewed as participatory behaviors representing multiple roles in bullying. For example, Victimized Active Defending in this study reported the highest level of victimization and also presented the highest active defending.

The third perspective considers the person-centered analysis adopted in this study as opposed to the dominantly used variable-centered analysis. Existing studies considered participant roles as “actions” (Gini et al., 2008; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010), but researchers primarily used variable-centered analyses (e.g., correlations, regressions, and path models), not

person-centered analyses (e.g., latent profile analysis, latent class analysis, and cluster analysis). A new perspective is provided in the current study by examining the profiles of four different forms of participatory actions in bullying that allows this person-centered approach to consider how the sample can include multiple subgroups characterized by different combinations of behavioral parameters (Morin et al., 2016). These three viewpoints helped us understand the dynamics of how children are involved in heterogeneous participation in school bullying. The uniqueness of this study is highlighted by adopting all three viewpoints together as opposed to most previous studies that considered only one or two perspectives of these.

Both the uninvolved passive bystanding and the uninvolved active defending groups showed low involvement in bullying and victimization, but they appeared to have a contrasting pattern in active defending and passive bystanding. This result highlighted that the “uninvolved” group could be divided into subgroups, which supports examining a more complex group dynamic in the bullying process, beyond the “uninvolved” only (Salmivalli, 2010). The uninvolved active defending and the victimized active defending groups also showed similar patterns of high active defending and low passive bystanding behaviors while at the same time showing a contrasting pattern in bullying and victimization. This finding indicated that active defending behavior needs to be understood more broadly by considering various participant roles rather than as a single type of behavior.

School connectedness and life satisfaction were found to be significantly associated with the profiles supporting our guiding framework of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems. We found interactions between peer relationships and school-related individual assets, such as school connectedness and students’ life satisfaction. These results contribute to the understanding of bullying participation as an aspect of the mesosystem, which demonstrated there is an interrelation between two microsystems (peer and school contexts). For school connectedness, the uninvolved active defending group reported the highest level of school connectedness. This finding is similar to other research, which showed higher school connectedness was related to the willingness to intervene for peers (Ahmed, 2008; Chapman et al., 2014). School connectedness overall appeared to tend to decrease when students experienced passive bystanding, victimization, and bullying.

Life satisfaction showed a slightly different pattern across the profiles in comparison with school connectedness. The uninvolved active defending group showed the highest life satisfaction compared to lower life satisfaction for the victimized active defending group and uninvolved passive bystanding group, respectively. These results indicated that life satisfaction is lowered when students experience both victimization and passive bystanding, while active defending is increased when students report a higher level of life satisfaction. Lower life satisfaction of the uninvolved passive bystanding group compared to the uninvolved active defending group might have come from shame or guilt due to perceived failure to intervene (Ahmed, 2008; Mazzone et al.,

2016). Interestingly, victimized active defending students reported significantly lower life satisfaction than uninvolved passive bystanding students. Given that the presence of active defending can be associated with higher life satisfaction, this finding suggested that the impact of victimization can be greater than the protective role of active defending in life satisfaction.

We examined how the profiles differed by students’ sociodemographic composition, such as sex, grade, and ethnicity to see whether there is another ecological interaction between bullying participation profiles and individual characteristics. Only sex showed a significant association with the profile membership. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Varjas et al., 2009), boys were more likely to belong to the bullying passive bystanding group than girls. No significant association was found between profiles and grade, unlike prior work which reported that elementary school students were more likely to report being victimized by their peers than older students (Lebrun-Harris et al., 2018). This may be explained that the children in this study were all 4th–6th graders and that they may not be developmentally distinct enough to have grade level differences. A recent review supported these findings that the association between bullying and age was weak (Zych et al., 2015).

Findings on associations between bullying participation and race/ethnicity are inconsistent. Some studies reported no racial differences between African American and White youth in bullying victimization (Estell et al., 2007), whereas others indicated a significant racial difference (Hong et al., 2021). The result in the current study should be carefully interpreted as race/ethnicity was dichotomized (i.e., White and non-White). More study is needed to clarify what contexts and factors make differences in bullying participation across individual characteristics, in particular, race/ethnicity. An additional focus on bias-based bullying and victimization as well as bystander behaviors can be considered to better understand the association between individual characteristics, including race/ethnicity, and profiles of bullying participation.

Implications for counselors

Findings suggest that counselors working with children involved in bullying assess distinct profiles delineated by students’ participation in bullying. Counselors are encouraged to promote their understanding of the way individual students can be involved in multiple roles at the same time, across situations and social contexts. Data collection using a brief checklist of questions examining different types of participation in bullying will be beneficial in an assessment of students’ bullying profiles (McCormac, 2015). Specifically, Figure 1 provides an example of a way of visualizing where a child is situated in terms of multiple bullying participant roles so that it can be efficiently communicated with the child, teachers, and parents. Appendix includes an assessment tool for practitioners to identify students’ participation in

bullying (see also Figure 1). Sample questions for counselors and other clinicians to consider utilizing in this assessment include “Rate yourself on each behavior on a scale of 1 (never involved) to 4 (very often);” “How do you make sense that you rated 4 on being bullied and 3 on active defending?”; “It would help me to know more about how come you rated passive bystanding as 4”; and “What shape of profile do you want to see for yourself a month from now?”.

Being equipped with a person-centered perspective and a social-ecological framework is essential in implementing intervention programs. When counselors in school offer intervention for a targeted group, victimized children as an example, the counselors should be aware that these children may also show defending behavior with a commitment to prosocial behaviors. When implementing a universal antibullying program, counselors are strongly recommended to target students’ prosocial behavior (e.g., defending). Counselors can use children’s prosocial attitudes as strengths and resources to build positive self-concept and resilience (Lenz, 2021).

Counselors can also promote active defending and prevent bullying victimization to maximize students’ well-being at school. An Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) approach can be utilized, which was devised from humanistic theory to cultivate children’s skills and abilities needed in developing their internal capacities (Lemberger, 2010). The ASE approach involves cultivating changes at the individual level and also the environmental level, featuring a social justice lens. ASE helps counselors recognize the interrelatedness between a child and social circumstances in confronting injustices and maximizing one’s internal assets for advocating for others within the school environment (Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014; Liu et al., 2020). Counselors at school can introduce situations for students to develop skills, such as reflexive connectedness, reflexive self-regulation, and reflexive systems engagement, to effectively deal with their reality and participate in the transformation of their school environment for their oppressed peers (Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014). Through the lens of ASE, counselors reflexively work with children to develop both self-advocacy and social justice skills to advocate not only for themselves but also for peers, essentially promoting student well-being.

Limitations and future research directions

Limitations of the current study were that the sample school district received antibullying intervention throughout 1 year which might have affected the report and composition of bullying participation. Dependence on self-reports may limit the reliability of the results. A multi-informant approach to data collection, such as peer nomination and parents’ and teachers’ reports could provide more reliable information on the profiles of bullying participation. Racially and ethnically diverse student populations also deserve greater investigation of latent classes or profiles of bullying participation.

Additional outcome variables that may be related to the profiles of participant roles in school bullying were not examined. Future research could investigate a variety of outcomes using this person-centered approach, such as latent class/profile analysis as existing literature shows bullying participation is associated with a variety of psychological, behavioral, and health outcomes (Blood et al., 2011; Holt et al., 2015; You et al., 2008). Future studies could examine contexts in which students have different participation roles with this person-centered approach. Students may present different participatory behaviors in bullying across types of bullying, social norms, characteristics of peer groups, social and physical power of a bully, and presence of others.

CONCLUSION

Our results highlighted important findings on participation profiles in school bullying, and associations with school connectedness and life satisfaction. A novel contribution from the study was to identify different participation in bullying across four different types of involvements (i.e., bullying, victimization, active defending, passive bystanding). Four profiles were identified, and profile membership was found to have significant associations with school connectedness and life satisfaction. Active defending was found to be related to high school connectedness and life satisfaction, while victimization and passive bystanding were associated with low school connectedness and life satisfaction. Overall, the results contributed to the knowledge of the ways to promote school connectedness and life satisfaction based on the complex dynamic of bullying participation, and the findings have implications for school-based practice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Isak Kim  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5490-8063>

Jun Sung Hong  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2816-9900>

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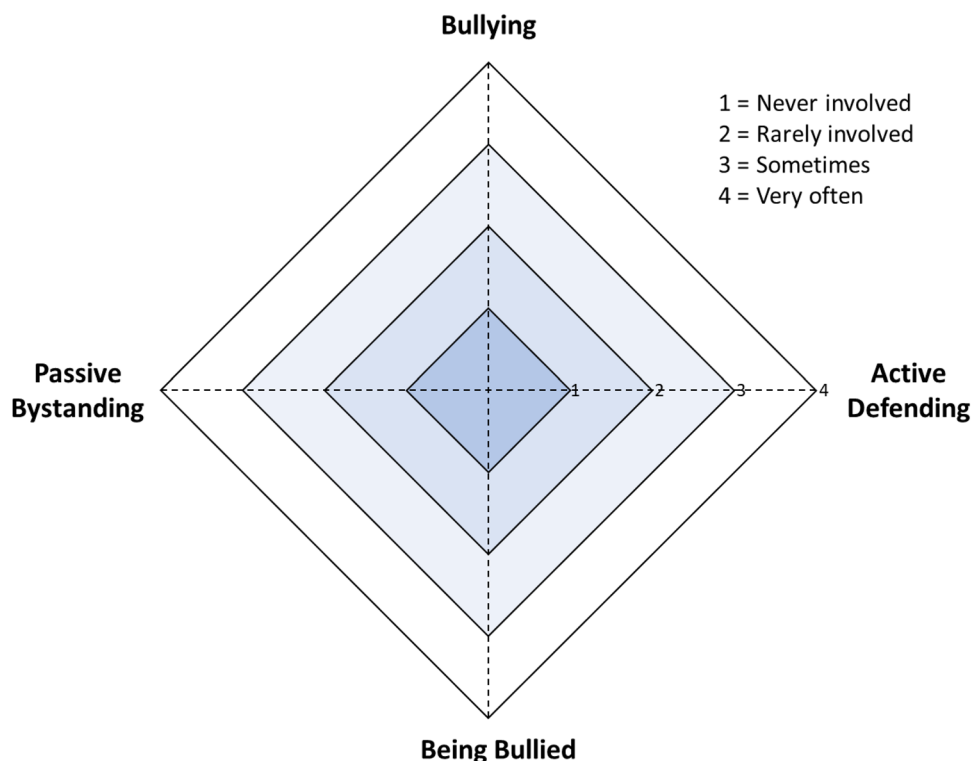
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APPENDIX

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT TOOL AND SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Suggested Assessment Tool and Sample Questions



Sample questions to consider when using the assessment tool

- Have you ever experienced any of these behaviors recently (or over the last month)?
- Rate yourself on each behavior on a scale of 1 (never involved) to 4 (very often).
- How would your closest friend (or teacher, parent) rate you on this?
- How would you describe what is happening to you given the shape of this profile?
- How do you make sense that you rated 4 on being bullied and 3 on active defending?

- It would help me to know more about how come you rated passive bystander as 4.
- What do you think about how you identify (e.g., as a girl, as an African American) has affected the shape of this profile?
- What do you think how this profile has affected your life in school, such as feeling connected to school or satisfied with school life?
- What shape of profile do you want to see for yourself a month from now? Let us draw using a different color.
- What strategies have you already used to make that change? How did they work?
- What other plans can you make to make the new shape of the profile achieved?